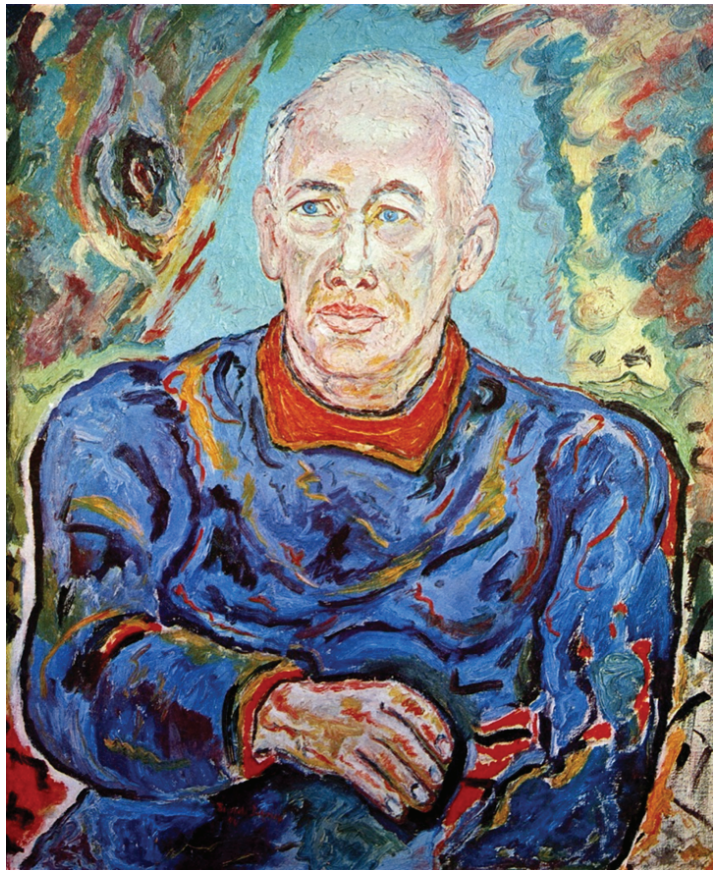
Karl Orend

Dipped in my Own Life's Blood

Notes on Reading & the Evolution of
Henry Miller's Compositional Technique



Alyscamps Press
Paris

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To the memory of George Whitman

"Those who know how to read a man know how to read his books."

"The writer is, of course, the best of all readers, for in writing, or 'creating,' as it is called, he is but reading and transcribing the great message of creation, which the Creator in his goodness has made manifest to him."

"Fiction is always closer to reality than fact."

— Henry Miller

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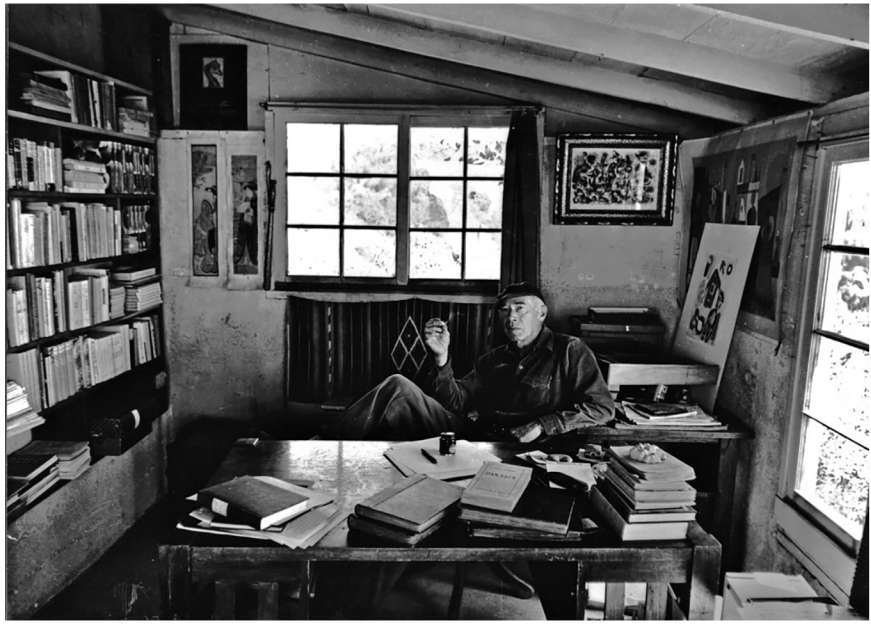


Introduction

In *Art & Outrage*, writing to two of his literary allies from the Paris years and oldest friends, Lawrence Durrell and Alfred Perlès, Henry Miller described his (alleged) attitude towards his writing life:

> "Since I wasn't really meant to be a writer, all that was permitted to me to give expression to was this business of writing and being a writer; in short, my own private struggles with this problem — my grief, in other words. Out of the lack, I made my song. Very much as if a warrior, challenged to mortal combat and having no weapons, must first forge them himself. And in the process, one that takes all his life, the purpose of his labors gets forgotten or sidetracked."

This account is a symbolic one. It echoes that of the Narrator of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (*In Search of Lost Time*) — who spends his life hoping to become a writer and, believing himself to have failed, only comes to the realization that he has not at the end of his written account of his struggle. To attentive readers, such as Durrell and Perlès, the allusion was clear.

Henry Miller may have believed, at times through his life that he was a failure as a writer — and not cut out for the medium. This was a result of his personality, which saw him swing violently between being convinced he was great and certain he was a terrible failure. Even in the mid-1940s, in Big Sur, after writing several major books, receiving high accolades, and being lauded as a major writer in France, Judson Crews recalled Henry Miller as a man deeply insecure about his literary reputation — desperate to be acknowledged. Brassaï also wrote of Miller's instability and overwhelming depressions during the years when Grove Press was fighting to gain the right to publish *Tropic of Cancer* freely. The fight had both practical and enormous emotional and symbolic importance for Miller. At the end of an illustrious career, he canvassed the Nobel Prize shamelessly and fruitlessly. He saw it as the most important possible validation of his essential place in literary history.

In the 1920s, Henry Miller considered becoming a painter — just as, earlier, he had once wanted to be a composer. Music might easily have been his preferred means of expression, but his frustration at knowing he could never be

a major talent made him shy away from the attempt to establish a professional career.[1] Writing was different. As early as 1914, in private letters, Miller talked about his writing — and the fact he believed he had "a message to give to the world." He committed to writing over many long years before achieving any significant success. His earliest essay, on Nietzsche, was written circa 1914 — his first book, *Clipped Wings*, in 1922; his second, *The Evolution of the Messenger* between 1924 and 1927; *Moloch*, drafted in 1927–8 and *Crazy Cock*, written between 1928–1931. Meantime, there were several essays and articles and *The Mezzotints* (many un-located) that appeared under his name and the names of his wife, June Mansfield, and maternal grandfather, Valentin Nieting.

By the mid-1920s, the unknown Henry Miller was already telling his friends to keep his letters for posterity and the use of his future biographers. Lawrence Durrell once remarked that Miller spoke, in the late 1930s, as if he was a genius before anyone in America had ever heard of him. Betty Ryan, recalling 1938, remembered Henry Miller as a writer absolutely certain of his place as a major figure in literary history. He was, like Proust, far from presenting a balanced picture, when he claimed that what he wrote was merely an account of his struggle to write. Writing was Miller's vocation. Few modern American authors have left behind such an extensive corpus. Many scripts by Miller remain un-published. Many more were planned or started but never completed. Shifreen, Jackson & Ashley's bibliography of his published writings (Alyscamps Press 1993/4) extends to almost 2,000 pages, including editions in well over 30 languages.

Writing did not come easily to Henry Miller in the early part of his career. The reasons are not hard to fathom. Henry was an obsessive reader. He loved to read about everything, from sociology and politics to astrology, religion, literature, biography, art, philosophy, military history, mysticism, plays, and much more. He read most of the great writers in every field of study he explored — though he much preferred non-fiction, autobiography, letters, and plays to novels. He read the great books and plays of the world, ranging from Greek tragedy, Elizabethan and Restoration drama and Petronius to Dante and Rabelais, Boccaccio, Shakespeare and Goethe, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Cervantes. Amongst his contemporaries, he read the most important novelists of his time, including James Joyce, Knut Hamsun, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest

[1]Henry Miller taught piano occasionally, as late as 1931, when he gave lessons to Bertha Schrank, "Tania" of *Tropic of Cancer*.

Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence. Henry Miller discovered many of the early twentieth century masterpieces around the time they appeared. He read, from 1931, in three languages, and avidly devoured not only books, but also dozens of literary magazines and journals in English, French, and German.

Not content with reading great and innovative writers, Henry Miller sought to emulate them. Many of his favorite writers before 1928 were Nobel laureates, such as Romain Rolland, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Mann, and Knut Hamsun. Miller watched the Nobel for literature closely during these years. He aimed high. It was the benchmark of greatness in one's lifetime. Henry tried to learn, from early Nobel winners and other major authors, such as Élie Faure, how to write a masterpiece. He was not content simply to write a good book. He wanted to write a novel that was great, immortal — at least, during the 1920s, on a par with contemporary and emerging greats, like Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Upton Sinclair, or John Dos Passos. Starting out with such aims, and comparing oneself to the masterworks of some of the greatest writers of all time (many written only after decades of struggle) is almost certain to bring about paralysis. It leads to an inability to hone one's own unique style. That is exactly what happened in the case of Miller. The block released when he had the courage, with the help of Michael Fraenkel, from August 1931, to write using his own unique voice, with no thought for reader, publisher, or market.

Henry Miller realized that there was a vast difference between many of the successful writers of his day — who were significant literary figures only because they tapped into some popular element of the *zeitgeist* — and a major writer who would endure. Thus, while June Mansfield loved popular literary authors like Maxwell Bodenheim or Robert McAlmon, Henry knew instinctively they would not last. He showed an uncanny ability to distinguish the great from the seemingly important, even at the earliest stages of his career. Having identified what was likely to endure, Henry Miller believed that if he could dissect the styles of these major writers it would teach him to write as well as they did. He set about, with furious dedication, to copy, imitate, and emulate the styles of his masters of the 1920s — such as Feodor Dostoevsky, Knut Hamsun, Élie Faure, Thomas Mann, Arthur Machen, and Nikolai Gogol.

Henry Miller's desire to capture the greatness in the works of his idols such as Élie Faure, was so pronounced that at times he stole from them. This practice is hardly uncommon even among great writers. It is said that minor writers

plagiarize, while great writers steal. This is true — though almost no one likes to admit it about a major author, least of all his or her admirers. James Joyce "borrowed" from Italo Svevo, François Rabelais, and Eduard Dujardin, while denying that he had ever read Rabelais. Shakespeare stole liberally from lesser know writers, as have many of the established writers of our times, such as Miller's contemporary, Vladimir Nabokov, in his masterwork *Lolita*.

Henry Miller was far more honest than most in identifying his sources and inspirations. He did not mention them all. He does not list Gogol as a major influence, though he undoubtedly was, notably on *Moloch* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*. Miller often makes allusions to other writers that would only be recognized by the initiated (hundreds of instances remain unidentified, in print, by scholars) — such as when he alludes to Leonid Andreyev in his account (in *Tropic of Capricorn*) of trying (unsuccessfully) to write at a huge desk, surrounded by chairs, in the home he shared with Beatrice Wickens. Henry Miller certainly underplayed the major part played in developing his mature philosophy by Michael Fraenkel. It broke their friendship and caused Fraenkel untold pain. After Fraenkel's death, his widow, Daphné, carried on a hate campaign is a series of mimeographed brochures, known as The Richmond Hilliers publications, vilifying Miller, Nin, and Perlès for having stolen her husband's ideas. Miller and Fraenkel's collaborator, Walter Lowenfels, once wrote that Miller had built a career on Fraenkel's philosophy.

Henry Miller also failed to reveal how *Crazy Cock* was closely linked to literary models appearing around the time it was written, such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women*, and Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*. Miller could be unstinting in his praise of writers he esteemed, as can be seen in *The Books in My Life* and his numerous essays on other literary figures, such as Blaise Cendrars, Jean Giono, Anaïs Nin, and Richard Jeffries. He did tend, however, to write only short pieces, or in passing, about writers who influenced him most intimately in the retelling of his life story (such as Faure, Rabelais, Buñuel, Dostoevsky, Spengler, or Nietzsche), whilst writing at greater length about writers whose everyday life seemed to offer great parallels to his own relationships with women (such as Rimbaud or D. H. Lawrence). If there were strong parallels between his life story and that of a great writer, then the implication was that he too could be one of their company. It was a form of self-assertion and reassurance for his unstable ego. Miller was usually unable to write at length about writers with whom he had too close an identification on a deeper level, such as Faure,

Céline, and Nietzche. Miller could more easily write about Rimbaud because he had abandoned literature and arguably been defeated by his daemons. He could write about Lawrence at greater length because he believed he had surpassed Lawrence and therefore did not feel intimidated by him. Joyce and Proust, the other subjects of The Brochure, were another matter.

In *The Books in My Life* he wrote:

> "There are some authors who are at once too grand and too close to you. You never liberate yourself from the thrall of their enchantment. Impossible to tell where your own life and work separate or diverge from theirs."

Miller was afraid of being so close to these writers that in writing about them he might lose his own voice.

Throughout his life, Henry Miller generally used whatever influence he could garner to help the careers of other writers and to make them better known. He helped launch the careers of several — ranging from Gerald Durrell and Jack Kerouac to Tommy Trantino and Erica Jong. Henry lobbied extensively to get foreign works translated and published in America that otherwise might not have been (such as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*). He gave writing advice, over many years, to both friends (such as Richard Osborn and Anaïs Nin) and strangers. At the height of his fame, following the lifting of the ban on *Tropic of Cancer* by the Supreme Court in 1964, Miller even allowed his friend Thomas H. Moore (of the Henry Miller Literary Society) to publish an anthology of his texts on writing, in the hope that this would encourage other young writers, under the title *Henry Miller on Writing* (New Directions 1964).

Far from being a selfish writer, Henry Miller was both a great fecundator and encourager of others. He was so because it was in his character, but also because he had so often been helped, at difficult times in his life, by widely published writers who took the time to support his efforts and to affirm their belief in him as an artist and man. These included, among many others: Evangelist Benjamin Fay Mills, Heinrich Miller's client from the tailor shop

Frank Harris (who offered Henry practical help when he was struggling his first year in Paris and published him back in 1924), W.E.B. Dubois, who accepted his first significant article for *The Crisis*, Frank Vizetelly of Funk & Wagnalls, who wrote to Heinrich Miller that his son was probably a genius, as early as 1925, Ronald Millar at *Liberty* magazine, Michael Fraenkel (already an established writer) who greatly encouraged Miller from August 1931 and thus freed him to write *Tropic of Cancer*, and Blaise Cendrars, who came to Miller's home at the Villa Seurat shortly after *Cancer* was published and both befriended him and praised his first book effusively in print. The list could go on and on, to include writers and publishers such as: Samuel Putnam, William Aspinwall Bradley, Peter Neagoë, Ezra Pound, Anaïs Nin, Jack Kahane, Maurice Girodias, Barney Rosset, Huntington Cairns, Wallace Fowlie, George Orwell, Barnet Ruder, Gershon Legman, Carl Van Vechten, Ben Abramson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Bataille, Maurice Nadeau, and many others who, in some way or another, helped sustain Miller's career, and his faith in himself, in the most troubling of times — when he was threatened with censorship, imprisonment, or simply being unable to reach an audience.

In 1933, in Clichy, having by now become convinced of his ability to be a significant writer, Henry Miller started playing jokes on his future readers and scholars by inserting sentences and passages from (and allusions to) great writers directly into his texts — just to see if anyone would notice. Almost no one did. He was hinting that if you could not discern between a passage lifted from *Finnegans Wake* (the most awaited masterpiece of the decade, by a man many considered the greatest living author) and home-grown Miller, then he most assuredly must be seen as a writer operating within the same realm of achievement as James Joyce — even if no one had ever heard of him! The story of this transformation, and of Henry Miller's subsequent ongoing struggles with the notion of himself as a writer, and his attempts to ensure his place in literary history, can be used as a revealing tool to allow us to better understand his divided psyche. By exploring how Henry Miller became a writer, and how he chose to portray that struggle to the world, we can better understand not only the man behind the auto-hero of the novels, but also Miller's writing techniques.

Long before Henry Miller was a writer, he was a reader. An account of the genesis of his writing career demands we understand how and what he read.

Reading in the Formation of Miller as a Writer

Henry Miller loved to read. He was one of the most widely read of the major 20th century American writers. Before he knew the alphabet, sitting in his high chair, Henry memorized and recited poems and songs in German. From the time he learned to read, from his mother, aged 3–4, the sound of words and the patterns they formed upon the page beguiled him. Henry loved someone to read aloud to him. To read to a person he loved was perhaps the moment he felt closest to them — a time of pure communion. Henry Miller read to everyone he loved. He began, as a boy of four, reading to his grandfather Valentin, while he sewed at his tailor's bench at 662 Driggs Avenue. Henry Miller read to his childhood friends, such as Tony and Joey Imhoff, who often fell asleep to the sound of his voice. He read later to Barbara, his first daughter, to June and Anaïs, to Betty Ryan, to his children Valentine and Tony, and to everyone he cared for. Henry Miller and Emil Schnellock spent years poring over art books and studying paintings reproduced in books together. As a young man, Henry and Joe O'Reagan would spend hour upon hour reading the dictionary and *Encyclopedia Britannica* to each other. O'Reagan was an "eternal skeptic." He encouraged Henry to question everything he read and to follow up everything with his own research. He explained to Miller that words evolved in meaning and context over time. He told him to compare encyclopedias' and dictionaries' explanations and see that definitions mutated before ones eyes. Meaning and facts were not static, but in constant transformation.[2]

From the earliest age, Henry Miller built up a library of books. He asked for stacks of them every birthday and Christmas. He rarely ever left home throughout his life without a book in his hand, which he read on the bus or subway, or walking in the streets or at work. Frequently, in his adult life, he spent great amounts of time researching and reading in libraries, or asking

[2]"It soon became apparent that the meaning of a word changed or disappeared entirely, or became the very opposite, according to the time, place, culture of the people using the term. The simple truth that life is what we make it, how we see it with out whole being, and not what is given factually, historically or statistically applies to language too" (*The Books in My Life,* 49). Miller knew that encyclopedias and dictionaries were usually written by people selected for the job with an agenda in mind — they had a bias in their explanations that was linked to their individual personality, the market, publisher and the culture and society for which they wrote.

librarians, such as Lawrence Clark Powell at UCLA, for help in locating books he wished to read. George Arthur Henty was Henry Miller's favorite author in childhood. He also loved H. Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Eugène Sue, Fennimore Cooper, Sienkiewicz, Ouida, Edgar Allen Poe, Jack London, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, George Moore, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Kipling, Balzac, and Mark Twain. Every occasion for celebration or gifts would see another pile of books pass into Henry's hands. His mother and extended family fostered his love of reading. Her father, Valentin, warned her she would regret it. Reading would make Henry introspective and fanciful and harm his eyes, Valentin claimed. Each of these predictions arguably came true.[3]

By his late teens, Henry Miller would need glasses for myopia caused by his endless reading by candle and gaslight. Reading would become his mother's despair. It allegedly got him fired from his first real job, at Atlas Portland Cement, for overindulging in books on company time. From time to time, as an adult he would become disgusted with his addiction to books and try walk away — to stop reading completely. This was one reason for his flight to Chula Vista, in 1913, to become a ranch hand. It never lasted long. Books were vital to Henry Miller's stability and happiness.

Often as a young man, Henry Miller attended public lectures, which only rekindled the flame of his bibliomania. It drove him back to the Montague Street Library in Brooklyn, and New York Public Library at 42nd Street & 5th Avenue, to follow up what he had heard. Miller spent whole days in the public libraries — often reading books a shelf at a time, like "an opium addict in his cell."[4] Miller, by the age of 18, had already devoured an entire library of children's books inherited from his father's predecessor Isaac Walker, and the complete library of The Harvard Five-Foot Shelf of Classics, plus a multitude of other books. Frequently, he read a book a day. Henry read everything from books on moles, whales and ophidians, textbooks, handbooks, and mythologies, to technical works, philosophy, religion, and curiosa. His most frequently reread books, as a child, were *Children's Stories from the Bible* and the King James Bible. When June Mansfield wanted to wound Henry, and feed the self-loathing his over-addiction to reading engendered, she would tell

[3]Henry Miller's paternal aunt gave him many books, all through his childhood, including the books of Samuel Smiles' *Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* and Knickerbocker's *History of New York*, which would influence his depictions of the city. (*The Books in My Life*, 45).

[4]*The Books in My Life,* 51.

him to go back to his books — "it's the only way you learn anything."[5] Henry Miller sought explanations for everything in books — such as the time he had used Forel's psychiatric textbook to try to convince June that the nature of their relationship struggle was a case of "amorous tyranny." Throughout his life, Henry Miller would identify with characters in books and their authors. He repeatedly drew parallels to his thoughts and actions and those of famous writers (such as Rimbaud or Lawrence) or their characters (such as Papini's The Failure). He later wrote of great writers as his brothers — Brother Cendrars, Brother Giono, and Brother Céline. Yet, Henry claimed to have no reverence for books *per se*.

Henry Miller was both a bibliomaniac and a logomaniac. He recalled, even decades after he had last seen them, the binding, the colors, typography and illustrations of books he loved. He liked to use printers' dummies for his notebooks (as in *The Nightmare Notebook*, written, symbolically, in the dummy of an edition of Walt Whitman). He regularly had his loose notes bound as books (as with *The Paris Notebooks*). Henry always recalled the ambiance he associated with his favorite volumes — and usually the atmosphere and conditions under which he had read them. Often the books he wished to read were difficult to obtain, restricted, banned, or out of print. In the Montague Street Library, in Brooklyn, the books were identified by a series of stars, depending on their level of adjudged immorality, or danger they posed to the casual reader. Sometimes, Henry claimed, even books he had never been able to obtain were important to him because their very existence prayed on his mind and gave him wild imaginings of what they contained. It was not until he was nearly sixty and living in Big Sur that he had a library of books of his own choosing and almost total access (via Lawrence Clark Powell at UCLA) to everything he desired to read. Henry Miller had a Proustian memory, both for books and for his own life. Distortions of his life in his books were deliberate and symbolic, not forgettery.

Henry Miller would often annotate the books he owned. He placed comments and comparisons to other books in the margins and end-pages.

[5](Kenneth C. Dick *Colossus of One* Den Haag). The women in Miller's life were often responsible for his most important discoveries in literature. For example, Beatrice Wickens introduced him to Knut Hamsun, June Mansfield to Marcel Proust and George Grosz, Jean Kronski to Rimbaud, and Anaïs Nin to L-F Céline. Henry and the women he loved always exchanged books. They often lived life in partial imitation of characters they loved.

In times of financial desperation, he would try to sell these volumes as collectors' items. Years later, he would turn back to them and seek to discover a remnant of his former selves, which he could rejuvenate as a catalyst for his art. One of his pivotal experiences as a child, at the time of the Spanish-American War, had been reading lives of Admirals Dewey and Farragut. In re-exploring these adventures, Miller later realized that his parents had unwittingly sown the seeds of a rebel by allowing him exceptional freedom in his reading. They allowed him this freedom partly because they did not read themselves. They had little conception of the capacity of books to open the world of "dangerous" ideas to a young man. Miller always recalled the time his father found him reading Balzac's *The Wild Ass' Skin*. Heinrich thought "ass" meant, "arse." He upbraided Henry for reading pornography. Henry identified, in his reading about Dewey, not with the great American war heroes, but rather, like his grandfather Valentin, with the oppressed and their hapless victims. He came to admire Filipino rebel Aguinaldo, and then later other rebels against authority such as General Robert E. Lee, Admiral John Paul Jones, and Toussaint l'Ouverture. The beginning of his espousal of his cult of the outsider and rebel began in the first decade of his life.

The nearby Brooklyn Navy Yard fed many of Henry Miller's early reading interests. He read constantly about sailors, sea battles, voyages, and overseas adventures. Travel literature always featured prominently in his life, as did religious books of all denominations. He read the religious texts of all the major religions and many of the minor ones. These ranged from the sacred texts of Buddhism and Hinduism to Baha'i, Scientology, Rosicrucianism, Mary Baker Eddy's Science and Health, The Book of Mormon, The Book of Sapphire, The Egyptian and Tibetan Book of the Dead, The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Gurdjieff. Then he followed this up by reading literature about them. When reading the Bible it was the Old Testament, the Tanakh, which he loved. He described it as a book only the Jews could have written. Allusions to the Bible are commonplace in Miller's writing.

About The Old Testament, he wrote:

> "A Goy gets lost in it, what with all the genealogical bitters, the incest, the mayhem, the numerology, the fratricide and parricide, the plagues, the abundance of food, wives, war, assassinations, dreams, prophecies."

The language and style of the Old Testament was a great influence on his work. Allusions to the Tanakh are scattered throughout his writings. As for the New Testament, which is the central text of most of his critics, he described it as a "puzzle book — for Christians only."

Miller knew the New Testament well, but thought of it as a secondary text. He much preferred other writings by Christian visionaries, such as Jacob Boehme and St. Francis. Miller was never a Christian. This fact is at the heart of the deep misunderstanding that his work has engendered — since most of his critics are, or were raised within, Christian American and especially Calvinist norms — and judge him accordingly.

Miller loved to share the knowledge and ideas he discovered in the world of books. He would, when impassioned by writers, write letters to all and sundry, encouraging them to share his discoveries. Over a period of decades, Miller would fill his letters and own writing with endless literary references and comments. He was so erudite that scholars would never see most of his allusions — such as when he based his descriptions of the Western Union detective in *The Rosy Crucifixion* on a Dostoyevsky character. Or when he based his descriptions of June (as Mona/Mara) partly on passages from Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*. Miller's symbolic associations of himself with Christ were, in part, derived from Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*. Miller's declaration of himself as "the happiest man alive" echoes Blaise Cendrars' "I am the freest man that exists" from *Un nuit dans le Forêt*, which Miller read in 1934, while revising *Cancer*. In this passage, Cendrars identifies himself as a Hindu — a fact that has great import for Miller's identification with his ideas.

Of all the writers Miller admired, the one he secretly felt closest to personally in Paris perhaps was Blaise Cendrars, who was the first major writer to acclaim him as a significant author. For all his claims to have installed Dostoyevsky as his God, Miller (never a believer in monotheistic religion) had other literary Gods. Miller saw Cendrars as an "evolved" writer — a man who moved in all directions at once, encompassing everything. This was one reason behind Miller choosing Cancer, the crab, as the title of his first published book. It is the only animal that can move in all directions with equal ease. Cendrars was always immersed in Life, "with a capital L." He was a man who loved the world and the people in it. This love and reverence for life allowed him, according to Miller, to "come closer than any author of our time to revealing the common

source of word and deed."[6] Miller believed that Cendrars restored the notion of the heroic, legendary, and fabulous to a psychically and spiritually impoverished modern society. Cendrars' life was, Miller wrote, always intertwined with the lives of other men. In his writings, he had attempted to reconcile us to the faults and weaknesses of men and to bring mankind closer, one to the other. Cendrars also collaborated extensively with other writers, musicians and artists, something Miller also tried to achieve in texts as varied as *The Hamlet Correspondence*, *What is Art?*, *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, *Art & Outrage*, and *Greece* (with Anne Poor).

Blaise Cendrars was a revolutionary in prose and poetry technique. He blurred the line between fiction and realism in the re-telling of his own life. His refusal to adhere to accepted forms led Miller to compare his work to that of the ancient Hindu temples of India. It was a comparison Miller would later make for his own books. Like Miller, Cendrars had been a musician before being a writer. Some of his sentences were staccato, almost pictograms, that could be read "like Chinese." Miller believed that Cendrars' only teacher had been life itself. This was something Miller also aspired to, but could not truly emulate. Cendrars lived in the present, which Miller believed was the ultimate and only reality. He wrote that Cendrars had taught us that "today" the present is both "profound and beautiful."

Henry Miller often assisted struggling writers once he became well known. He used his influence to try to force publishers to support their work. He never forgot the letter he had received from Nobel winner Knut Hamsun, in 1925, in response to a fan letter in which Hamsun begged Miller (a total nobody at the time) to help publicize his books, because Knopf were threatening to annul his contract, due to slow sales. During the late 1920s, Henry tried to gain an entrée into the literary world by writing to H. L. Mencken, Carl Van Vechten, and Sherwood Anderson. Years later, when an established author, he contacted them again and became their friend, never forgetting the encouragement they had once given.

Miller believed that character and personality determines the kind of books a man chooses to read. In his early youth, Miller read as a narcotic — "stimulating at first, but depressing and paralyzing afterwards." Reading offered an escape from a daily life of bitter family rows and loneliness. He sought communion

[6] *The Books in My Life*, 69.

in books. He tried to identify like-minded characters and thoughts, often impossible to obtain from the people who surrounded him. Henry was lonely within his own family and circle of friends. His was an unhappy childhood — like other traumatized children: "bruised by every contact with the world of adults they immolate themselves in dream and reverie."

During the years of struggle to become a writer, Henry Miller became listless and depressed after reading too much. At times, he despised authors and books. His ability to write was paralyzed by too much reading. The more he read, the more dissatisfied he was. Henry became, for a time, a snob, élitist. He turned only to those writers he thought to be the greats relevant to his time, as opposed to the dead classics, like Spencer's *Faerie Queene* that he came to hate, because he saw them as divorced from life. He read great writers:

> "Cold-bloodedly, with all the powers of analysis I possessed. In order . . . to rob them of their secret."

It was during these years that he taught himself slowly, page by page, the secrets of style and narration, and of how effects were produced in literary art. Miller realized eventually that every writer was unique — there was an elusive mystery that could never be learned. It had to come from within. Some of his favorite books were those which came into being unknowingly, where the author had not even imagined that his words would one day see print, and thus bared his soul unreservedly — as with the Diary of Nijinsky of the Letters of D. H. Lawrence and Vincent Van Gogh. Having studied all the suffering, struggles and tears that went into so many fine books, Miller, with time, became more indulgent with writers, more reverent and less critical. He loved to read about the lives of writers and identified closely with many of them and the characters in their books — such as Cendrars, Delteil, Dostoyevsky, Duhamel, Faure, Fraenkel, Giono, Hamsun, Lafcadio Hearn, Larbaud, Lawrence, Machen, Nietzsche, Rabelais, Rimbaud, Shaw, Spengler, Strindberg, and various Indian, Japanese, and Chinese authors.[7]

Henry Miller was obsessed by the narration of lives, of places and history. He gained a wide knowledge of history and the world, and a boundless curiosity to discover more, through his early reading. Facts, as such, had little meaning

[7]"Whatever I read of Chinese literature (barring Confucius) seems as if written by my immediate ancestors" (*The Books in My Life,* 30).

for Miller, who believed that even autobiography was "the purest romance."[8] Reading, so often as he did, about the lives of famous people, he became fascinated by the tales told about their exploits. He knew, even as a young man, that there was no such thing as objective truth. Nietzsche reinforced this belief. Fiction became, in his mind, potentially far closer to Reality than fact. Fiction and fact were fused together in his writing — just as they do in the daily life of everyone in recounting their exploits. Year's later, Miller refused to define his own work as fact or fiction, but made clear in interviews that he was always writing of events solely from his point of view. It was always a mixture of true events and invention. It was an amalgam of both life and art that had he hoped restored life to literature in the way it had existed in pre-Puritan times. He spoke of the great literature being fashioned with signs and symbols rather than mere words.

Thinking back on departed authors he admired he wrote:

> "A man who is dead . . . resuscitates himself, takes possession of you, and leaving leaves you thoroughly altered."

"He did this," Miller believed, "by means of signs and symbols." It was symbol that entranced Miller. That deep use of symbolism, in his own work, is one reason why he always claimed he wrote in Chinese.

Writers achieved greatness, not by the power of imagination or technique, but rather by:

> ". . . ability to exploit the vast silence which enwraps us all . . . Of all artists he (the writer) is the one who knows best that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and God was the Word."

Henry Miller believed that all he wrote (and all creation) stemmed from the divine force, what most people call "God." Ultimately, the writer deserved

[8]Miller made a strong distinction between writing autobiographical fiction or auto-romance and diaries. To lie in a diary as Anaïs Nin did, he believed showed signs of illness. Miller wrote: "The autobiographical novel, which Emerson predicted would grow in importance with time, has replaced the great confessions. It is not a mixture of truth and fiction, this genre of literature, but an expansion and deepening of truth. It is more authentic, more veridical, than the diary. It is not the flimsy truth of facts, which the authors of these autobiographical novels offer, but the truth of emotion, reflection and understanding, truth digested and assimilated. The being revealing himself does so on all levels simultaneously." (*The Books in My Life*, 37).

no credit. What a great writer uttered was not language, but prayer. Great writing was an inspired song of praise that helped man to commune with the divine.[9] It was a form of prayer that demanded nothing — being a song of praise rather than a supplication. Even after death, in the beyond, he believed the great writers were "perfecting their song." Henry believed that writers had a mission — this was to aid the creation of heaven here on earth, and to assert the union of man and the divine. It was the ideal that he saw closely replicated in India and explains why he had such a passionate response to that country and its culture.

Henry quoted Dostoevsky:

> "Our future lies in Universality, not won by violence, but by strength derived from our great ideal — the reuniting of all mankind."

The great writer has, to this end:

> ". . . caught the spirit which informs all creation and he has rendered it in signs and symbols."

This religious purpose is the reason Henry Miller so admired those writers who evinced this predominant spiritual dimension in all their writing, such as: Thoreau, Emerson, Dostoevsky, Blavatsky, Rabelais, Whitman, Tolstoy, Kropotkin, Faure, Gogol, Gurdjieff, Tagore, Maeterlinck, Muzumdar, St. Francis, and D. H. Lawrence. This religious element forms a major thread in Russian nineteenth century literature, which Henry revered. Miller's love of Élie Faure was shared by a writer who had a profound impact on *Tropic of Cancer*, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who in turn referred to *The History of Art*, most revealingly, as "my Bible."

Henry Miller wrote his first essay in his father's tailor's shop, around the age of 21.[10] It was on Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*. He came to identify writing as a religious act — and with a deep social purpose. He did not believe writing could be taught in colleges. Great writing had to be anchored in life. Much of this attitude originated with the famous authors of his youth — who lived lives

[9] *The Books in My Life*, 38.

[10] Miller revealed that his earliest submission was to an editor named Francis K. Hackett. He received an encouraging reply, for which he remained eternally grateful. This text is un-located, but Miller claimed that its style reminded him of reading André Breton's *Nadja*.

that were filled with images of unusual achievements and adventures. These included: Jack London (who, in part, inspired him to go to California), Victor Hugo, Emma Goldman, John Cowper Powys, Blaise Cendrars, and Frank Harris, as well as other leading anarchist writers.

Henry Miller did not single out writers as exceptional beings, contrary to what many of his readers believe. He thought they exploited their gift — like anyone else that had a God-given talent. If he stood up for them as a group it was because, in part, as a social rebel, he identified with them, since he believed they were particularly singled out for banning and persecution by government, religious fanatics, and moralists. He wrote: "The rebel, I firmly believe, is closer to God than the saint." After all, Christ, like Gandhi, was considered a rebel and criminal in his time. Henry believed that the great writers lived their books, while the journeymen authors did not. Those who live their books can potentially enrich and transform the reader and have a major social impact.

Henry Miller spoke of writing books as replenishing the granary of life — of putting back into it what one had drawn upon in order to create. It was all part of the ebb and flow of life. His ideal was to read less and less — ultimately, to have no need of books. We have need of them because we are insufficient unto ourselves — because we have not learned how to realize the state of divinity that lies within us. All art and literature is created out of imperfection and dissatisfaction, trauma or pain. Henry believed that this is why the men who have, most closely achieved an ideal state of being, such as the Buddha or Christ, had written nothing.

Looking back on his teenage years, Henry Miller remembered that many books he had sought out were on restricted access, or banned. Aged nineteen, Miller was refused access to Strindberg's *Diary of a Fool*. Nothing made him more determined to read a book than the fact he was banned from doing so. This was part of the motivation for his later refusing any attempts to censor his own writing, or publish a bowdlerized version. To Miller, a book that was banned was sure to be dynamite — and much sought after. He also believed that few books were truly original, because most writers were indebted to predecessors. The web of allusions and references, borrowings and imitations, both conscious and unconscious, stretched back centuries. It forms one continual song of creation. Miller acknowledged that he was a writer deeply indebted to others, yet he knew also that his use of their material, when combined with his own unique contribution was important enough to inspire other writers and readers.

Images or words retained from a book Henry Miller read as a child could return, later in life, to inspire him. They could provoke extensive study and contemplation, years after — such as the words "destiny" and "astrology," first encountered in Henty's *Lion of the North*. Miller would often transcribe phrases or passages from books on other writers into his own works. Sometimes he acknowledged the debt. Sometimes he did not. He felt as if the words had become part of his life and his character. They were words that he himself would have uttered. His identification was complete. It was the words themselves and the ideas they conveyed that had to be passed on. Since he believed that all writing came directly from the divine source, he did not, he claimed, think the ego of the author and attribution/acknowledgment of all borrowings was ultimately important. This is why he was initially so attracted to Michael Fraenkel's idea of anonymous books, outlined in his manifesto *Anonymous*. Henry originally intended to publish *Tropic of Cancer* anonymously. Miller was generous with his own lines and ideas. The largest selling poetry volume for decades in America was Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind*. The title came from *Black Spring*. When Ferlinghetti asked permission to use it, Miller gave it freely, not demanding any credit. Miller regularly copied out long passages from books to inspire him. He even later wrote phrases on the walls of his home, to encourage others to read the books they came from. He believed that in sharing what he had discovered, he encouraged the creative spirit in others. Henry Miller saw attuned readers as the author's "counterpart" and maybe, at times (as he had himself once been), his "secret rival." Miller affirmed that, in writing and creating, the author was:

> "Transcribing the great message of creation which the Creator, in his goodness, has made manifest to him."[11]

Miller often adopted the pose of being against all that was considered a "classic" in literature. He did this as part of a sustained attempt to situate himself in opposition to the canon — and because he identified with all that was outside of tradition, rejected, condemned and banned. Although Miller claimed to hate Shakespeare, he read his works. He even wrote a volume with Michael Fraenkel — whose starting point was *Hamlet*. At times, he railed against important influences, such as Goethe, in order to shake free

[11] *The Books in My Life*, 29.

of them. Although Miller raved about Dostoevsky, he never praised, in print, other accepted classics that had influenced him, such as *Anna Karenina*, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, the writing of Artaud, Breton, or Otto Rank, or the complete works of Oscar Wilde. By a judicious choice of what he revealed about his reading, by distorting the record of what he read, and by omitting to mention certain writers he had read extensively, Miller tried to shape his image for posterity. At times, Miller denied that he read a book that he talks about elsewhere and clearly had read. He also excludes many authors from any detailed mention that were important influences on his pre-*Cancer* life, such as: Maurice Maeterlinck, Rudyard Kipling, Georges Duhamel, C.K. Chesterton, Paul Morand, and Luigi Pirandello. The depth and breadth of his reading is extraordinary. Many of the writers he talks about, or makes allusion to, are now forgotten. They do not strike a chord with modern readers. To educated people of his generation, names like: Eugène V. Debs, Anatole France, Flinders Petrie, Janko Lavrin, Alice Bailey, Claude Houghton, Carlos Suares, Arthur Machen, and Hilaire Belloc were well-known names. A survey of Miller's reading shows that he generally preferred non-fiction to fiction.

It is important to recall that certain writers that Henry Miller knew as a young man have a vastly different reputation now than they did in his time. Wyndham Lewis, now neglected for his alleged fascist sympathies, was in the late 1920s when Miller first read him, seen as a possible rival to Joyce as potentially the greatest Modernist prose writer. He was also editor of *The Enemy*; a journal Miller and many others read avidly. While we recall Leo Tolstoy primarily for *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Miller's generation knew him just as much for his social, educational, political, and religious writings. Miller claimed he never read *War and Peace* (probably untrue), but he did read all of Tolstoy's books on religious and social questions. They influenced him, just as they did Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Yet Miller never draws attention to Tolstoy because he, like Goethe (a great influence on Miller) and other great classic authors, was writing within a canon that Miller was trying to shatter. Miller knew that Tolstoy was at times a banned author — in America and Russia. As such, Miller had an intense sympathy for him, as well as with his religiosity and social anarchism.

Many of the ideas expressed in books during Henry Miller's youth could not be printed today. Many writers were anti-Semitic, believed in racial superiority, or argued against the liberation of women. Even some women wrote against feminism. Other books demanded Communism and Fascism as a way of life in

America, or even a Jewish homeland in Uganda or Texas! Amongst the Jewish community themselves there was enormous disarray. There was a great deal of Jewish anti-Semitism. Some Jews argued that their people must assimilate if they were ever to survive. To even speak out against war, in Britain or America, could land one in jail. To be a conscientious objector was almost certainly to end up a social outcast or criminal. Subjects such as abortion or inter-racial sex (or just about any sex) were unmentionable. Books that we now considered classics were widely banned, such as *Ulysses*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, or *Elmer Gantry*. American society was so different from today that most readers would be hard-pressed to imagine the parallels Miller saw in books. He believed, for example, New York in the 1920s resembled nothing as much as it did the landscape of Dostoevsky's novels.

In *Nexus* he wrote:

> "And American life, from the gangster level to the intellectual level, has paradoxically tremendous affinities with Dostoevsky's multilateral everyday Russian life.... Though millions among us have never read Dostoevsky... they are nevertheless, millions of them, straight out of Dostoevsky, leading the same weird 'lunatical' life here in America which Dostoevsky's characters lived in the Russia of their imagination."[12]

One aspect of Henry Miller's reading that always shone through was his love for things non-American. His favorite fairy tales were not American, but rather the stories from Japan, including those transcribed by Lafcadio Hearn. He also had a love of traditional stories and tales from Arabia, China, India, and Africa. He described Chinese literature (excepting Confucius), as seeming to be written almost by his "immediate ancestors." He identified closely with its non-Christian morality and non-American humor. Chinese humor can seem to Americans, childish, cynical, prejudiced, cruel, and vicious — or come across as a deeply personal affront. Ridicule and savagery are used widely. The Chinese have been said to retain the "unconscious malice of the child" in their relations with others.[13] This sense of humor was Miller's own. It is linked also to Zen,

[12] *Nexus*, 19–20.

[13] C. T. Hsia "The Chinese Sense of Humor" *Renditions,* vol. 9 (Spring 1978).

awakening by violence and shock — and to a belief in hedonism as a valid personal philosophy. Henry Miller referred to the French as the Chinese of Europe. They have a similar sense of humor, as seen in the movie *Ridicule*, or the plays of Corneille or Molière. The most devastating thing a person can do to another in France, Japan, or China is to ridicule them or make them lose face in public. It can create life-long enmity. The violence of humor in these cultures was still evident in the beloved humorists and satirists of Miller's youth, whom he read avidly, such as Mark Twain and George Wilbur Peck. It was also an essential element of burlesque, slapstick, Grand Guignol, and the street and silent film humor of Miller's New York and Paris. Such violence, in humor, is common to societies under internal stress, or where competition between people is highly elevated, as in early 20th century New York. There are parallels with the harsh and anti-social humor of Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, and other artistic movements of the time. Yet, this tradition is millennia old. It appears in the gargoyles of medieval Catholic cathedrals, in Chaucer and Shakespeare, Restoration Comedy and popular and religious art in Africa and India. It is this merciless humor, free from Christian morality that permeates Henry Miller's portrayal of his characters in his auto-romances.

Henry Miller re-discovered many books during his life that he had initially dismissed. Even though he might be prejudiced against the idea or reputation of a particular book, he would be prepared to give it a try. Thus, he came to realize that *Wuthering Heights* was a book of "amazing power and beauty." As his tastes and frame of mind changed over time, some books remained eternal favorites — such as those of Dostoevsky or Lewis Carroll. Others lost their allure. He discarded Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and *Death in Venice*, and St. Augustine's *The City of God* by the early 1930s. Miller was always, above all, attracted to autobiographies and confessions and deeply personal books, such as the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Amiel, or Rousseau. He believed that each individual is unique and must build the foundations of his own education. This was why he was opposed to college syllabi and canons. He believed that these were determined by academics, who lived in a closed world divorced from real life. They ignored certain writers for fear of offending donors and university administrators, or parents of students. He did not believe that canons or university reading lists contain either the best books, or the greatest writers, since many of the decisions on what to include are made for political, financial, or religious reasons. Thus John Cowper Powys, one of Miller's favorites, is excluded from most colleges, even though he has been described as: "The greatest historical

novelist in the English language" and "...the only writer in English who can be compared to Tolstoy."

Academia is deeply rooted in establishment ideas — which Miller opposed. Henry believed, as an anarchist, that nothing should be imposed on the individual — least of all his religion, morality, and ideas. He saw colleges, in America, as designed to enforce conformity and a certain prejudiced worldview. Especially in America, in need of donors and benefactors, universities go out of their way to avoid offending anyone who might give them a bad reputation or cause funding to be withdrawn. Thus, Miller himself has rarely, if ever, been taught in most colleges, even though American universities' Special Collections departments currently own over five million dollars worth of his manuscripts.[14] This begs the question: If they think he is a major writer why don't they teach him? If they think he is not, why have they spent a fortune acquiring his papers? Miller believed that the ultimate authority in decisions about morality (and the worth of anything) must always be oneself, not society, or those in authority. He spoke of academics as people generally lacking in humor and imagination, not to mention breadth of education. The inability of most critics, academics, or biographers to understand Miller is clear evidence of that.

Henry Miller believed that many people never understand the motivations for the choices they make in life. Others, such as himself, have such a strong sense of vocation or destiny that it is almost as if they created the influences necessary for them to fulfill their goals or potential. Character and upbringing determines both what and how one reads. Thus, an American Conservative Christian reading *Sexus* will be both shocked and repulsed. He will condemn Miller roundly and probably try to ban the book. He will do this because he reads in the light of his faith. He believes his faith gives him the right to judge others and probably the moral duty to control what they do and say, or are exposed to. If a Hindu or Buddhist reads the same book, he or she will find nothing reprehensible in it. In fact, both Hindus and Buddhists will see strong parallels, in Miller's more sexual texts, to their own religious, literary, and artistic tradition. A Catholic reading Miller is far less likely to be shocked than a Protestant — as Miller's high standing in many traditionally Catholic countries, such as France, Spain, and Italy, shows.

[14]For a discussion of the omission of Miller from university courses see Karl Orend "Making a Place for Henry Miller in the American Classroom" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *(*2004). Also reprinted in *Nexus: The International Henry Miller Journal*, vol. 3.

It is also symptomatic of what Alan Bloom called "the closing of the American mind" that many Americans have almost no knowledge of foreign countries, religions, or their literary and artistic traditions. Henry Miller was deeply indebted to Hindu art and literature. Hinduism is the world's oldest religion and the third largest religion after Christianity and Islam. Yet, it has been estimated that less than 15% of Americans are thought to have any idea what a Hindu is. For men of Miller's generation this would have been incomprehensible. Hindu religion was seen, in that time, as an obvious (and enormous) influence on writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna were familiar names to any educated person. Rabindranath Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature when Miller was twenty-four. Gandhi was a world-famous political figure. The subject of Indian independence from Britain was a hot topic. Many Hindu writers, like D.G. Mukerji, were famous in America, as were the descriptions of India and Hinduism by 1907 Nobel winner Rudyard Kipling. Theosophy, with its debt to Hinduism and India, was, at that time, a major religion in the United States, as was Christian Science. This shows how something central to Miller's world has become, with time, totally obscure to ours — thus distorting our image of him and his writing.

Henry Miller thought that by the act of trying to write one would likely become increasingly compassionate and understanding towards others — both those who were trying to create — and those suffering or in distress. To write well, or to be a great writer, of necessity, entails a deep reservoir of compassion. Henry Miller believed that one could learn a great deal from technically and stylistically poor writers — as long as their intentions had been noble and they had given of their best. In those who did not accept the norms of academy prose and standard usage (Rimbaud's "Je est un autre"), one found a kind of "freedom and boldness" that was fecundating. What Miller sought, in both reading and writing, was communion. It was communion with both his fellow man and with a divine spirit.

Henry Miller, spoke of the writer thus:

> "By using language as his instrument, he demonstrates that it is not language at all, but prayer."

It was during the years 1924–30 that Henry Miller spent much time dissecting great books, to gain an insight into style and compositional techniques. He believed that would-be writers should begin with a study of their own age.

They should then move backward in time and outwards towards other literary traditions. Henry once studied *The Magic Mountain* for a year, Swedenborg for months. *Death in Venice*, he believed, for a time, in the late 1920s, to be the greatest novella ever written. Often, his passions, in reading, were inspired by deeply personal reasons. His love of reading about John Paul Jones came from his childhood love for the Brooklyn Navy Yard and his imaginings of becoming a sailor or traveler. His identification with Romain Rolland came through the novel *Jean Christophe*, which tells the story of a young would-be pianist/composer who has an alcoholic father. The parallels to the young Miller, in this character, are strong. In Paris during his early struggles he identified with the life of Strindberg and Hamsun, aspired to emulate Paul Morand, and the struggles of Pappini's *The Failure*.

Despite the wide education Miller obtained through books, he always insisted that his greatest education came from the streets. It came from observing life, from discussions of ideas and books with his young friends in vacant lots when he was a lad, and from when he listened to public orators — either on street corners or in lecture halls. Many of the seminal influences in Henry Miller's life were people he discovered, or whose ideas he first heard, at public lectures — such as Emma Goldman, Benjamin Fay Mills, W.E.B. Dubois, Hubert Harrison, John Cowper Powys, and Big Bill Haywood. Many of the ideas that governed Miller's life and work and formed his mature personality were rooted here. Emma Goldman, almost single-handedly, opened the world of European literature to Miller — just as Benjamin Fay Mills and Robert Challacomb gave him the possibility of a massive education in Eastern religion and philosophy.

Henry Miller identified closely with authors he admired. He tried to find publishers for those who struggled, and to aid them in any way he could. As he became a well-known name, he wrote prefaces and blurbs. He purchased multiple copies of books by writers in order to give them away and thus spread the word. He had deep empathy for struggling writers who reminded him of his young self. At times, Miller would identify so strongly with the plight of an author that while writing a letter of support he would weep. He became "enthusiastic" and "naïve" to the point that others ridiculed him, or publishers rejected his suggestions at first glance. He knew his attitudes and likes alienated some people, because he was never "discrete" or "delicate." Some people found him both "insensitive" to publishing reality and unwise in business terms. Yet, Henry Miller had a strong conviction that many great writers were

unjustly neglected. Had not Whitman and Balzac (and Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin) had to peddle their works in self-published editions? Had not Virginia Woolf founded Hogarth Press and Anaïs Nin Gemor Press, because no publisher would take a chance on them? Many Lost Generation presses came into being for exactly that reason — thus, Shakespeare & Company's edition of *Ulysses*, Michael Fraenkel's Carrefour Press and Gertrude Stein's Plain Editions. Many books came to the attention of readers because of his endorsement.

Miller reserved a special place in his heart for what could be called "wisdom books" — small books that had great religious or spiritual import. The greatest of these, to his mind, was the *Tao Te Ching*. He also included volumes such as *Symbols of Revelation* by D. H. Lawrence's final collaborator, Frederick Carter, the writings of D.T. Suzuki, or *The Round* by Anaïs Nin's cousin, Eduardo Sanchez.[15] In such books, Miller found theories that were fundamental to his work — such as the notion of Apocatastasis and the tenets of Zen. Miller linked the Oriental humor of Lao-tse with that of Rabelais — thus drawing together two of the greatest influences on the composition of his books.[16] Henry thus drew together the traditions of China and France ("the China of Europe").

Miller was drawn to fictional books that had deep religious import. The greatest of these he thought were Balzac's *Séraphita*/Louis Lambert and Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. He saw his own writing as having a similar religious and spiritual purpose. Books can enjoy a vogue, but that eventually fades away. Only at this point, can a book begin its "journey on the road to immortality."

Thinking of *Siddhartha*, which influenced *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*, Miller wrote:

> "Long before I accepted Jesus Christ, I had embraced Lao Tse and Gautama the Buddha."

Such comments make it clear that to see Henry Miller within a Christian tradition is bound to lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Miller thought of Christ primarily as a Jewish figure: "a man of sorrow," whose message was in an already established Jewish Rabbinical tradition. Words like sin, guilt, and redemption, the deferment of Heaven until another time, were anathema

[15]See Karl Orend *Henry Miller's Red Phoenix: A Lawrentian Quest* (Paris: Alyscamps Press, 2006) passim.

[16]*The Books in My Life*, 53.

to Miller. From the age of nineteen, when he first read extensively on Buddhism, Transcendentalism, and Hinduism, he was obsessed by the notion of enlightenment and paradise here on earth. His mantra became "acceptance," in the Buddhist/Hindu tradition, rather than judgment, guilt, punishment or conformity, and deferment of paradise, as in the Judeo-Christian.

In *The Books in My Life*, the first chapter devoted to H. Rider Haggard, Henry Miller reveals the importance of "Woman" in his development as a writer. Woman, and male-female relations, as a central subject matter of his writing, is obvious. Women also played a major role in both inspiring Miller and introducing him to other writers who influenced him. That Anaïs Nin played an essential part in fostering his talent, during the 1930s, is beyond dispute. Writing was sometimes, for Henry Miller, an act of love. He wrote individual books for his close friends in Paris. He dedicated books to those who had sustained his talent and helped him materially. Henry also wrote books and essays in which he, in part, sought to immortalize those who were important in his life and whom he loved — such as Betty Ryan (*Colossus of Maroussi*), *Joey* (Alfred Perlès), *The Book of Friends*, or *The Rosy Crucifixion* (June Mansfield).

In H. Rider Haggard, whose books Henry Miller first read circa 1905–6, we can trace the genesis of an obsession with the mysterious feminine that was to haunt Henry Miller's great autobiographical romances. Here he found "Ayesha" and "She" — models for the *femme fatale* he would transform June Mansfield into, in order to immortalize their love. Haggard's "She" became the "Her" of *Tropic of Capricorn*.[17] In Ayesha, Miller found a woman who was "super-real, in every sense of that maligned word." It was this kind of figure Miller created in his transformation of the real June Mansfield into the Mona and Mara of his books. This is a woman who is super-real in the sense of both surreal and above and beyond the real — she is, like Ayesha, "of the eternal elements, both discarnate and incarnate." Silently revealing the transformation he had made of the everyday June Mansfield, Miller writes of Ayesha:

> "About her personage the author has spun a web of such proportions that it almost deserves the appellation

[17]"How very much there was of 'She' in 'Her'…. In some strange, twisted way, having dedicated myself to the task of immortalizing Her, I convinced myself that I was giving Her Life in return for Death" (*The Books in My Life*, 96).

> 'cosmogonic'[18]...of the dark mothers, of which mysterious race we get hints and echoes in Germanic literature."

The words Miller uses to describe this figure are revealing of his fascination with the unknowable in woman. This kind of mysterious female is "dark" and linked to the "black star," which symbolized both June Mansfield[19] and Louise Miller in Henry's writing. We begin to see the outline of Henry Miller's obsession with the unknowable in woman as being rooted in his own Germanic "dark mother" Louise Miller, whose character, in some elements, such as her scorn, greatly resembled June's.

In his writing, Miller, revealed:

> "I thought I could resurrect the past, thought I could make it live again — in truth...all I accomplished was to reopen the wound that had been inflicted upon me. The wound still lives, and with the pain of it comes the remembrance of what I was."

It took him years of writing to realize that, ultimately, "all is one." No matter how much time he spent enmeshed in the books of others, he always returned to write another chapter in "the one and only book, the book of myself." Back in 1927, while June was in Paris, with Jean Kronski, Henry had set out a plan for what he intended to be the only book he must write, the story of his life with June: "the Book of My Life — my life with Her." Revealingly, Henry stated that: "...to speak of creation means to bury oneself in chaos." Chaos was

[18]Pertaining to the creation or evolution of the universe.

[19]"In the dark, locked away in the black hole with no world looking on, no adversary, no rivals, the blinding dynamism of the will slowed down a bit, gave her a molten copperish glow, the words coming out of her mouth like lava, her flesh clutching ravenously for a hold, a perch on something solid and substantial, something in which to reintegrate and repose for a few moments. It was like a frantic long distance message, an S.O.S. from a sinking ship. At first I mistook it for passion, for the ecstasy produced by flesh rubbing against flesh. I thought I had found a living volcano, a female Vesuvius. I never thought of a human ship going down in an ocean of despair, in a Sargasso of impotence. Now I think of that black star gleaming through the hole in the ceiling, that fixed star which hung above our conjugal cell, more fixed, more remote than the Absolute, and I know it was her, emptied of all that was properly herself: a dead black sun without aspect. I know that we were conjugating the verb love like two maniacs trying to fuck through an iron grate. I said that in the frantic grappling in the dark I sometimes forgot her name, what she looked like, who she was" (*Tropic of Capricorn*, 96).

inseparable, in his mind, from Woman. Writing, and reading were, therefore, linked eternally to the feminine principle.

Miller admitted that he sometimes lost his identity in other men's books. At times, he identified so closely with characters or authors that he seemed to blend together with them. He was unable to separate his own life and feelings from theirs. This allowed him to, paradoxically, both find and lose himself. He also differentiated between those books he discovered with or via friends, or by word of mouth ("our daily instruction"), and those he was forced to read in school. The former nourished him, while the latter often left him cold.

Miller referred to his schoolteachers as "my penal instructors." He claimed:

> "Our true educators are the adventurers and wanderers, the men who plunge into the living plasma of history, legend, myth."

Henry included in this category writers such as Blaise Cendrars. Miller attempted to portray himself as one of these men. To sustain this impression, he greatly distorted many of the accounts he gave of his life.

H. Rider Haggard was the writer who taught Henry Miller that life and death were twins, rather than opposites:

> "Only once is it given to us to experience the miracle of life, only once the miracle of death: what happens in between is like the turning of a wheel, a perpetual rotation about an inner void, a dream that never ends, the activity of the wheel having nothing to do with the movement engendering it."

Miller's ideas here may be confusing to some Christian readers, since he believes in reincarnation and is not asserting a faith in one single human life. When we reach the level of true being, then we are, at last, in a death-less realm.

Henry Miller links Ayesha to "the soul of Nature." That which sustains her also consumes her. The idea is a Hindu one — encompassing the continual spiraling cycle of creation and destruction, birth and death, the constant interplay of opposites engendering all existence.

> "The love which alone can transform the soul of Nature is divine love," Henry Miller claims.

Here, he links to the Hindu/Tantric tradition of male and female gods in unison and opposition, engendering the universe. Miller also identifies the feminine as

inextricably linked to Nature, the male to the spiritual divine. He asserts that: "the splendor of neither can be manifest except through union." Love contains the key to the enigma of identity. This enigma remained a source of constant fascination to Henry Miller, who felt his personal identity to be in flux, unfixed. It was through a quest for love and communion that Miller sought to clarify and stabilize his own personality. He existed, in fixity, only in relation to and through union with another — hence his obsessive need for a woman to love and worship and for writers and readers to identify with.

In the story of Ayesha, Henry Miller traces a progression of:

> "Devotion transformed by love, merges with understanding, then death, then divine being. That which always was, always will be, now is eternally. Nameless, timeless, indefinable, the nature of one's true identity is thus swallowed up in the manner of the dragon swallowing its tail."

The symbol is again a Hindu/Buddhist one.

Henry Miller was fascinated that H. Rider Haggard, a reserved Englishman, had revealed in his books "a hidden nature, a hidden being, a hidden lore, which is amazing." Like Miller, Haggard's books were often written:

> "At full speed, hardly stopping to think.... It was as if, by virtue of this technique he found the way to project the living plasm of previous incarnations. In spinning his tales, he permits the narrator to philosophize in a loose way, thus permitting the reader to catch glimpses of his true thoughts. His story-teller's gift, however, is too great for him to allow his deepest reflections to assume the cloying form and dimensions which would break the spell of the recital."

This description could easily be applied directly to Miller's mature work, such as *Colossus of Maroussi*, *Tropic of Capricorn,* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*.

Miller began his writing career intending to "give something" and "to tell the truth about myself." In woman and in sex he both lost and found himself:

> "For a long time reality for me was Woman. Which is equivalent to saying — Nature, Myth, Country, Mother, Chaos."

Henry Miller's great, unrequited, love was Cora Seward. She remained his ideal — his unattainable equivalent of Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura. If Henry Miller had had the courage, he could have looked back over his relationships with women and traced a common thread — obsession and/or sexual dependence, followed by self-loathing, pity, disassociation and disgust, leading to cruelty and abandonment, followed by taking up with a new woman. Each woman he sought out echoed, in some unspoken way, his mother. But, Henry Miller would never have had the guts to admit it. At the age of 19, after High School graduation, Miller had been supplementing his income by giving piano lessons at 35 cents an hour. He was in the full flush of his phase of athleticism, influenced by Charles Atlas and Louis McFadden. He ran with the Xerxes Society, had two racing bikes, and had recently taken a lowly clerk's job, studying salesmen's' itineraries and expenses, at the Atlas Portland Cement Company on Broad Street, Manhattan, for a dollar a day, after Heinrich decided he could not afford to send him to university. Henry attempted six weeks at City College but hated it, and dropped out after a course on Spencer's *Faerie Queene*. Every day, for nearly four years, he stood in the subway car hanging from a strap, and read all the way to work, all the way home. He memorized long passages, as the crowds surged and pressed against him — and on his walks to the station and at lunch. Henry Miller read with great concentration — often the heaviest of intellectual tomes. He had little money — what cash he did have went for board to his mother and then on books and friends. Often, he had to work into the evening. He returned home to gulp down a meal with his retarded sister, Lauretta, and then out again to see his pals, or to pass a quiet evening in the library, rarely sleeping five hours a night.[20]

Henry Miller was in love with Cora Seward. He often cycled for miles, imagining he might catch a glimpse of her, watching her house from a distance. In the dark, gloomy parlor of his parents' house, on Decatur Street, he would read his way through the complete set of the Harvard Classics (received from the estate of one of his father's colleagues), many of which he found oppressive, such as *Ode to a Waterfowl* and *I Promessi Sposi*.

Henry Miller had a recurrent dream. In this dream he had secreted away a set of magical books that he prized above all others. They were kept, in a hidden vault, in a house in nearby Fort Hamilton. Where the house was exactly and how he came there to read these books in his dreams, he never knew.

[20] *The Books in My Life*, 264–5.

All he did know was that on lonely Saturday afternoons he would take his Bohemian racing wheel and speed through Dyker Heights, Bensonhurst. He finally reached Fort Hamilton. There, he caught a glimpse of Cora Seward's home. He often felt utterly indifferent to the world. As Henry always did, when he was in deep pain and lonely, he buried himself in the world of books.

He read far too much; and slowly turned in upon himself. Henry read to assuage a pain too deep to bear, and to find the companionship of like-minded souls, that peopled the pages of literature, but were absent from his daily life. Everything seemed to remind him of Cora. He imagined, as he sped along, that she might be around the next corner, waiting and happy to see him. If she were not there, then he would add another mile to his ride, constantly pushing her familiar figure further into the distance, until he finally came face to face with the truth — that Cora would not be waiting — at least not today!

Miller's dream library of books was not comprised of love stories. They, rather, held the key to unspoken mysteries that were linked to the divine. One volume, he sensed, held the key to everything. He had begun the book, but had lost it. It could no longer be found. This absence filled him with dread and a sense of irreparable loss.

In another dream, Henry Miller was reading a book. Cora and her unknown lover were reading it over his shoulder. Then, suddenly, he had the answer. The missing book, that held the key to his life, was this very book written he had written. Henry asked himself if he had been able to write the book his dreams, then why not in reality? He would once say that ever since the day he actually took up the pen and began to write his aim had been to write this ideal book, for Cora Seward to read. He sought to write, for his true love, the book buried deep in his dreams — inspired by one of his favorite childhood books — Richard Jeffries' aptly entitled "The Story of My Heart."

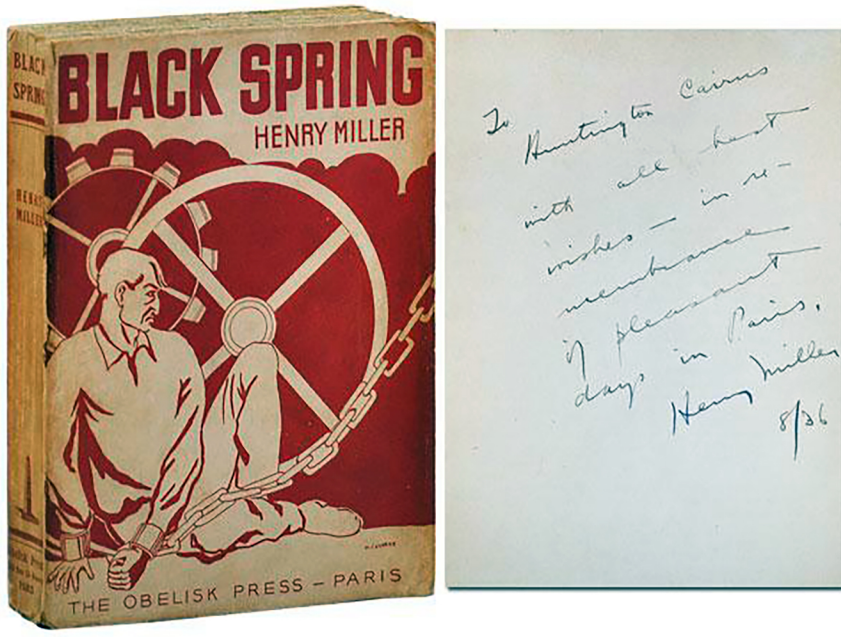
This story of dreams, buried in a draft of *The Rosy Crucifixion* and *The Books in My Life*, forms the foundation of Henry Miller's unspoken secret — that his writing was simply his life-long quest for love, tenderness, communion, harmony, peace, and understanding.

Dream, fantasy, and reality would always intertwine in Henry Miller's prose. Many of the scenes in his novels and short prose are, in fact, "waking dreams," imaginary happening and reveries, even if they are presented as actually having taken place. Henry Miller remained fascinated by the import of dreams. He kept a dream diary in Paris. He was familiar with most of the literature on dreams, beginning with Freud. There was, he came to believe, a book that each

of us commenced to write at birth and which would only end with our death. It is a book that we might ruin, or whose significance we could fail to recognize, but which, ultimately, linked us all to God. We would eventually be forced, Henry Miller said, to complete the book in the after-life and beyond, since out of a lack of self-awareness: "We refuse to understand what we have written here and now."[21] Thus, he asserts his belief in reincarnation, which, as *Mother China & the World Beyond* shows, lasted all his life.

Henry Miller was enmeshed with Pauline Chouteau at the time of his 21st birthday, 26th December 1912. His parents organized a party for him, with his Xerxes Society friends and local girls, at their Decatur Street home. They gave him a meerschaum pipe, which he still used, in Clichy, in 1933. Henry was still as deeply in love with Cora Seward as ever, but he abased himself, believing, as he did, that he was not worthy of her — "it seemed to me that a zero such as I deserved no better fate."[22] Seeing Cora seated in the corner of his parlor, the pain was too much to bear. Henry ran into the snowy street, on the day after Christmas, weeping as he fled.

[21] *The Books in My Life*, 280–82.
[22] *Tropic of Capricorn* (first draft), 131.



A first edition of *Black Spring* dedicated to Huntington Cairns, who was the unofficial U.S. government censor, but also a friend of Miller who secretly helped him behind the scenes.

Living Books

To Henry Miller, men who never wrote a line could become "living books." These sometimes unknown individuals had, potentially, as much impact upon Miller and his writing career as the great writers he admired and tried to emulate. One that he chose to single out, from the days of his earliest struggles to be a writer, when he was living with Pauline Chouteau, was his downstairs neighbor, Lou Jacobs. Henry was the unofficial janitor of the building — charged with taking out the trash and sweeping the hallways. He was otherwise unemployed, and shared an apartment with Pauline (The Widow), her dying, tubercular son, George, and a boarder. Henry had cut ties with most of his friends. He barely saw his family, since his mother had threatened him with a knife the day he had mentioned marrying Pauline, who was some 15 years his senior. Henry was, meantime, "eating my heart out for having surrendered the girl I loved" (Cora Seward). He was "a slave to sex," which was the only thing, apart from guilt, shame and pity that held him to Pauline. In this desperate time, Lou Jacobs became a surrogate father to Henry Miller:

> "My Guide, my Comforter, my Bright Green Wind.[23] No matter what the hour, what the occasion, no matter if Death were knocking at the door, Lou Jacobs could make me laugh and make me laugh with him. For all your ills I give you laughter."

Miller had already discovered one of his most important models, François Rabelais, by this time. He imagines, in *The Books in My Life* that Lou Jacobs had assimilated Rabelais completely. Jacobs gave the impression he had read everything worth reading. He seemed to enjoy life thoroughly — "outwardly mocking but inwardly reverencing, inwardly adoring and worshipping." It was perhaps Lou Jacobs who gave Henry Miller his profound love of the King James Bible.

> "Without realizing it I received from this man my first real schooling.... The oblique method of art...always from the center outward. Always the spiral motion: Never the straight

[23]An allusion to the Heart Chakra and to green as the symbol of life-giver and of rebirth.

> line, never sharp angles, never the impasse or cul de sac...he had the faculty of looking upon everything as an open book... the essence of all he had read permeated his entire being, had become one with his total experience of life."

Here, along with the writing of A.P. Sinnett, which he read around the same time, is the origin of Henry Miller's use of Hindu Spiral Form.

It was Lou Jacobs who sowed the early seeds of Henry Miller's auto-biographical romances:

> "There are not more than a dozen basic themes in all literature, he once said to me. But then he quickly added that each man had his own story to tell, and that it was unique."

Henry Miller found Lou Jacobs possessed a profound wisdom that compelled his listener to think for himself. This, Miller would try to carry over into his post-*Cancer* works. During the months when Henry conversed with Lou Jacobs he read Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes & Hero Worship*. This book had a profound effect upon him — "had shaken me to the roots of my being." Henry felt convinced, at this point, that he had the potential to become extraordinary. He believed that: "the way one reads a book is the way one reads life." As Alfred Perlès once wrote: "a snail's pace suits me fine" was the best way to assimilate what one read.

Lou Jacobs was thoroughly at home with the underbelly of society and the everyday men of the streets. He also loved to talk about books. He fed Henry's Miller's incipient bibliomania. Balanced and harmonious in his being, Miller would imagine Lou Jacobs as a Buddhist:

> "Sometimes, when the image of Lao-Tse seated on the back of a water buffalo crosses my mind, when I think of that steady, patient, kindly, penetrating grin, of his, that wisdom so fluid and benevolent, I think of Lou Jacobs sitting before me at the chessboard.... A great comforter and yet as remote as the dog star. Always bowing out of the picture, yet the farther he retreated the closer he was to you...the sound of his laughter only the ancient ones could reproduce.... It was the laughter of the gods, the laughter which heals, which, sustained by its own unimpeded wisdom of life, splinters and shatters all learning, all seriousness, all morality, all pretense and artifice."

In Miller's great works, we find an attempt to echo the personality of this unknown public accountant, Lou Jacobs, who once spent evening after evening sustaining and inspiring the young Henry Miller — and provided him with his first example of a "living book" — a man who could teach how a life might be read, better lived and rewritten as an autobiographical romance, told first through the spoken word. By the time Henry Miller believed he had reached the point when he was at one with himself, Lawrence Durrell called him "the Happy Rock." The name had profound Buddhist overtones. (Durrell was raised in India and knew Hinduism and Buddhism by heart). Lou Jacobs provided Henry Miller with his first close contact with a man who lived life in the present, in Buddhist fashion. In so doing, he became a figure that Henry subconsciously spent a lifetime trying to emulate. The coming together of the personal influence of this "living book" added to the educational influence of Robert Challacomb and Benjamin Fay Mills, the meeting of an unnamed Hindu at Chula Vista and his discovery of Transcendentalism, Theosophy, Hinduism, and Buddhism through these men shaped Henry Miller's entire life's work. The tribute to Lou Jacobs included in *The Books in My Life* was written thirty years after Henry Miller had last seen him.

Several other men and women could have been listed by Henry Miller amongst the category of influential living books in his life. Among those he did write about were John Cowper Powys, whom Miller heard lecture regularly and for whose lectures, books, and person he had "an unholy veneration." Miller's comments on Powys reveal that he (surprisingly to many) saw a close link between the British author and the writer to whom Miller was most often compared in the 1930s, Louis-Ferdinand Céline:

> "Like Céline, he has the faculty of telling of his misfortunes with humor. Like Céline he can speak of himself in the most derogatory terms, call himself a fool, a clown, a weakling, a coward, a degenerate, even sub-human being, without in the least diminishing his stature. His book is full of life-wisdom, revealed not so much through big incidents as little ones."

The description could be equally of Henry Miller — as could another phrase he uses to describe Powys; "a Spenglerian actor." Miller and Powys became friends during the 1950s. They had many things and many favorite writers in common — such as Rabelais and Dostoevsky, about both of whom Powys wrote books.

Henry Miller wrote that to encounter a

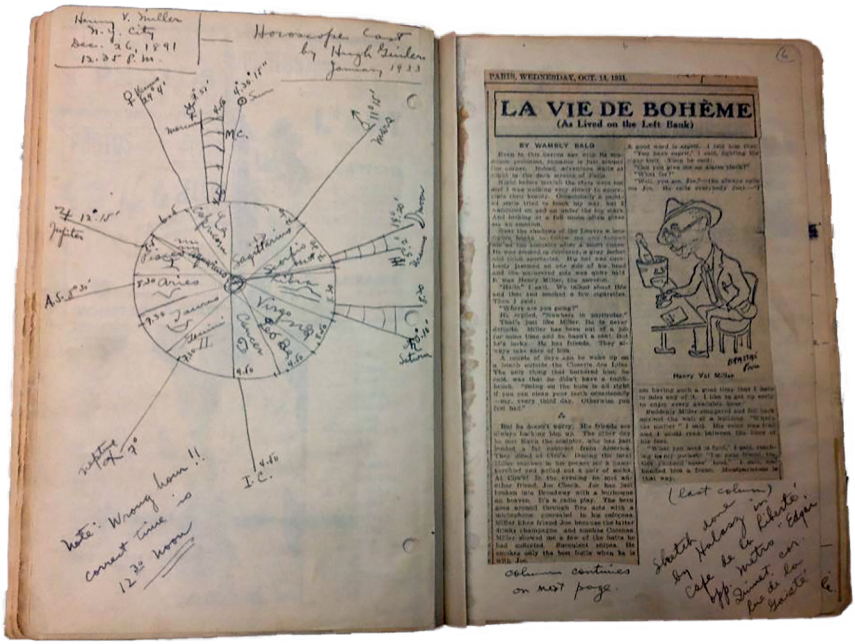
> "Man we can call a living book is to arrive at the very heart of creation. He makes us witness to the consuming fire which rages throughout the universe entire and which gives not warmth alone nor enlightenment, but enduring vision, enduring strength, enduring courage."

Miller was particularly drawn in Powys' lectures to the way he seemed to "rave" about authors, thinkers, and philosophers from the depths of his soul. In both his lectures and books, Powys gave proof that his vision of the world was rooted in Eastern thought. He was one who had succeeded in the aim of "incorporating oneself into the living spirit of the universe." To encounter a man such as Powys was "to arrive at the very fount of creation."

Writing to Miller (April 3rd 1950), Powys admitted that he was he was "born a speaker and not a writer; a speaker I am by nature and always have been, but writing to me is an acquired thing & I can only do it at all by being long-winded and rhetorically, oratorically, eloquent." This connection to spoken language was shared by Céline and Faure and had a special meaning for Miller who, while he felt uneasy speaking in public has only found his true literary voice when he followed Michael Fraenkel's advice to "write as you speak." Several influences drew Miller and Powys together, including Whitman, Dostoevsky, Rabelais, Dreiser, and Emma Goldman. Powys came to consider Miller "by far the greatest American since Dreiser and the greatest genius since Whitman."[24] Miller wrote about Whitman, whom he saw as "the bard of the future," in both *Stand Still like the Hummingbird* and *The Books in My Life*. He recognized Whitman's view of life as "all-embracing," "cosmic," and accepting of "no barriers of any kind, not even evil." He was also a bard who "reviled the whole trend of American life" and was simultaneously "the incarnation of modern man" and "reminds one of the 'resurrected' Christ." Whitman had "no respect for tradition" and "forged a new language" that was "universal" from an outlook that was "not American, any more than it is Chinese, Hindu or European." Miller saw Whitman as an "anarchist" living and writing with "a faith born of love." In his descriptions of Whitman we catch a glimpse of how Henry Miller wished to be perceived himself. Like Whitman, Miller, in his

[24]Powys to Miller, letter of 14 August 1952.

mature works has his sights firmly fixed on "the potential, the divine potential in man." Whitman and Miller shared the vision of all creation as part of a ceaseless flow and were "anchored in the eternal now." They were both to a large degree living and writing outside of time, "impervious to the ills of the day." Miller linked Whitman clearly to the Indian tradition of The Upanishads. He thought that, in photographs, Whitman resembled "an Oriental poet." Miller believed that his mature view of life echoed Whitman's and that they shared a vision of a new order on earth. Whitman was, and Miller hoped himself to be, one of the elect that are the precursors of a new kind of man to come. Whitman was a new kind of individual who knew no fear and accepted all. He lived his life and writings "in Brahmic splendor."


Horoscope Cast by Hugh Baillie January 1933
PARIS, WEDNESDAY, OCT. 11, 1933.
LA VIE DE BOHÈME
(As Lived on the Left Bank)
BY WAMBLY BALD
Henry Val Miller
(Last column)

Sample pages from Henry Miller's Paris notebooks.

The Early Years

Although Henry Miller began to write non-fiction around the age of 21, he did not make a sustained attempt to get published until 1919. During the years between these two dates, he doubtless wrote other occasional pieces and many literary letters to his friends, as well as millions of words in his head that he never committed to paper. In 1919, he published a series of small, highly literary and referential, reviews and occasional pieces in *The Black Cat* magazine. There is nothing exceptional about these texts. They did, however, contain a mixture of highly literary allusions, cheap intellectualism and personal asides, in which the author's personality came through, suggesting ideas that would have been unpalatable to certain moralists. The faintest echoes of the mature Miller are already present.

Henry Miller was, in 1919, working a clerical job and deeply unhappy with his wife Beatrice. They had a small baby, Barbara, whom he loved after his fashion. Henry chafed at the expectations the role of husband foisted upon him — not just because he had married solely in order to avoid the draft, rather than from a genuine desire to wed, but also because he was an anarchist, and as such, believed in free love and that marriage was a social constraint, rather than a source of joy. It was, in part, in his need to avoid the barrenness of his family life that Henry Miller began to try to write in earnest. He took a large pigeonhole desk that had stood for years in his father's tailor shop and placed it in their brownstone, third-floor parlor, ostensibly as his writing desk, much to Beatrice's chagrin. Henry described surrounding the desk with twelve chairs. It was a symbolic gesture, as he tried to conjure up an imaginary audience (like the twelve disciples) to whom he could recount the texts he wanted desperately to write. The allusion to the Last Supper is obvious. It should alert us to the religious and prophetic role Henry Miller assigned to himself.

Always, the audience was on Henry Miller's mind. He was unable to compose anything of note:

> "All the pigeon-holes were empty and all the drawers were empty; there wasn't a thing on the desk or in it except a sheet of white paper, on which I found it impossible to put so much as a pot-hook."

It was not as if Henry Miller were simply trying to write by force of will. Rather, he felt like a volcano, ready to explode because of his inability to express the ideas and stories that swarmed in his head:

> "I think of the titanic efforts I made to canalize the lava which was bubbling inside of me, the efforts I repeated thousands of times to bring the funnel into place and capture a word, a phrase..."

The effort later reminded Miller of the men of the Stone Age, who were unable, for millennia, to achieve things that nowadays seem effortless — riding horses, making a certain tool, domesticating plants of animals, or making a wheel. The great discoveries, he believed, came "by accident," and not by effort — as if by dint of a miracle. The more we struggle, then the harder it becomes to achieve our ends. At this point, Miller had not discovered some of his seminal influences (some of whom had, as yet, written nothing of note) — including Élie Faure, Marcel Proust, Blaise Cendrars, Luis Buñuel, Dostoevsky, Georges Duhamel or L-F Céline. Others were already in place — such as Nietzsche, Eastern religion and philosophy, D. H. Lawrence, Emma Goldman, the great dramatists, Petronius, Theosophy, A.P. Sinnett, the major street orators, the Bible and John Cowper Powys. Although he imagined he might have written millions of words in his head, they were intelligible, but soulless and worthless, because they were rooted solely in the intellect:

> "Everything I had written before was museum stuff, and most writing is still museum stuff and that's why it doesn't catch fire, doesn't inflame the world…. Even my dreams were not authentic, not bona fide Henry Miller dreams."

In his accounts of these years, one thing that is unmistakable is Henry Miller's profound isolation. He had no one to talk to who really understood him or believed in him. There was no one to whom he could express his deepest self. He also felt completely alienated from the life of family and business in which he was entangled. This was supposed to be life. Henry could not convince himself that this was anything else but the negation of life or, as Michael Fraenkel would later put it, in his "Death Theme," which resonated so strongly with Miller, from August 1931 — "death in life."

Henry Miller felt, for years, as if he were in the midst of a torrential river of inspiration. Ideas and words gushed and coursed through his mind. He could

not stop the words flooding into and through him. Neither could he channel them into coherent writing:

> "I was not only in the middle of the current but the current was running through me and I had no control over it whatever."

Creation and the life force are associated, for Miller, inextricably, with flow.

One day, everything changed. Henry would recall, all his life, that moment. It was then that:

> "I brought the machine to a dead stop and the other mechanism, the one that was signed with my own initials and which I had made with my own hands and my own blood, slowly began to function."

It happened one day at a vaudeville theatre in Manhattan. On that day, Henry Miller experienced:

> "For the first time in my life the meaning of the miraculous. I was so amazed when I heard my own cogs meshing that I was willing to die then and there for the privilege of the experience."

As he passed by the doorman and entered the darkened theater, he became disoriented. Suddenly, the curtain rose. Henry was stunned by the emotions that arose in those few seconds that preceded the spectacle. Alluding to Shakespeare's "all the world's a stage," he goes on:

> "As the curtain slowly rose, I had the feeling that through the ages man had always been stilled by that brief moment which precludes the spectacle. I could feel the curtain rising in Man. And immediately I realized that this was a symbol, which was being presented to him endlessly in his sleep and that if he had been awake the players would never have taken the stage, but that he, Man, would have mounted the boards. I didn't think this thought — it was a realization, as I say, and so simple and overwhelmingly clear was it that the machine stopped dead instantly and I was standing in my own presence and I was bathed in a luminous reality."

Henry Miller imagined he saw a man mounting stairs to take his seat in the balcony (symbolic of the "Heavens" or abode of the gods).

> "The man could have been myself, the old self which had been sleepwalking ever since I was born...the man never reached the top of the stairs and his hand was never removed from the marble balustrade."

From that moment on, Henry Miller wrote:

> "I saw only that which was alive; the rest faded out in a penumbra. It was to keep the world alive that I rushed home without waiting to see the performance and sat down to describe the little patch of staircase, which is imperishable."

The symbolism of this passage is profoundly religious. It echoes the ladder imagery, and the rite of ascension to paradise, alluded to frequently in Miller's work — covered, in depth, in *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*. I have explored this use of symbol extensively in *Henry Miller's Angelic Clown: Reflections on The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (Alyscamps Press, 2012).

Miller identified his moment of revelation as taking place about the time the "Dadaists were in full swing." The date is ambiguous, but certainly post summer 1917 and pre-1919. It may have been this event that inspired Miller to attempt his first published articles, in 1919. Miller claimed that he had heard of neither the Dadaists nor Surrealists until ten years later — he was probably lying. A man as well informed of cultural matters as Henry Miller was could not have failed to notice the impact of Dada in New York. Miller was also lying when he claimed he had never read a French book or had a French idea at this point. We know that he read French literature in translation extensively in his youth (Victor Hugo, Pierre Loti, Anatole France, Charles Baudelaire, the Symbolists, etc.) and through his 20s. Miller claimed he was the "unique Dadaist in America and did not know it." In mentions of his early writing, Henry Miller identifies it clearly with Surrealism and Dada. There is evidence in his letters to support this claim. On his very first day trying to be a prose writer, March 20th 1922, Miller wrote a letter to Emil Schnellock that contained the sentence:

> "And some day I am going to raise corn-fed hogs in Iowa and wear bandana handkerchiefs; spit huge gobs of spit the while I sing a threnody of Atlanta."

On November 5th 1923 a letter contains:

> "A vast panorama of tintinnabulations, a molten sheen of iridescent acerbities, a mumbo-jumbo of tortured hieroglyphs, a frazzled counterpane of dyspeptic arabesques. Try to pile Pelion on Ossa if you can; subtract the perihelion and add Osiris; multiply by numismatics and divide by hydrated quadratics; then shake well before using. If still unconfined, call Melrose 9693 and Dr. Paul will fetch a straightjacket. In the left-hand coat pocket of the doctor's dirty dressing gown find Alice in Wonderland; call for the Prisoner of Zenda; take your place in the solid phalanx of a myriad beasts of the bedstead and hitch your wagon to a star in the best Wordsworthian manner, then tell me if you can hear the clarion call of justice."

The techniques of found phrases, stream of consciousness, automatic writing and cut and paste imagery, so beloved of Dada and Surrealism, are already present. The second of these texts, with its references to Lewis Carroll, reminds us of the style and content of the "Jabberwhorl Cronstadt" section of *Black Spring*, written in 1933.

According to Miller's account in *Tropic of Capricorn*:

> "Nobody understood why I was writing that way. I was so lucid that they said I was daffy. I was describing the New World — unfortunately, a little too soon because it had not yet been discovered and nobody could be persuaded it existed. It was an ovarian world, still hidden away in the Fallopian tubes."

This world Henry Miller claimed to have perceived in the mid-1920s, but which, in reality, he only came to appreciate from circa 1932 was:

> "The indestructible world which man has always carried within him; it was neither old nor new, really, but the eternally true world which changes from moment to moment."

Miller claimed: "Any primitive man would have understood me." This notion links Miller's style to those artistic movements, such as Surrealism, which were heavily influenced by the art of primitive or prehistoric societies. Those around him, in America, failed to understand him. In order to be understood by them he claimed that he would have been obliged:

> "First of all to kill something, secondly to arrest time. I had just made the realization that life is indestructible and that there is no such thing as time, only the present.... The one thing they did not want to hear about is that life is indestructible. "

Miller had spent years, in New York, trying to get by, by lying about his true feelings and by keeping his mouth shut about things that affronted his personal sense of morality and freedom:

> "I learned, by bitter experience, to hold my tongue; I learned to sit in silence, and actually even smile, while all the time I was foaming at the mouth."

The language and social conformity Miller was obliged to acquiesce to was built upon violence upon the person. The language of his society was "a code language of (the) rape and murder" upon which America had been built. He felt:

> "Alone in an hemisphere of violence, but I was not alone as far as the human race was concerned. I was lonely among a world of things lit up by phosphorescent flashes of cruelty."

Henry Miller felt that he could not express his feelings openly until he had undergone a long apprenticeship. The dangers of being too outspoken in his writing had soon become apparent, when the police intervened and investigated him for his 1924, anti-racism, Mezzotint, entitled "Nigger." Some of his favorite writers, such as Emma Goldman, had been imprisoned and deported for expressing their ideas openly. Many, such as Frank Harris, had been banned and threatened with jail. Others, such as Ben Reitman, had been tortured, with police collusion. Miller wrote: "I had to accustom myself gradually to the penalties which freedom involves."

The "ovarian world" Miller was describing was "a product of the life rhythm." American society, he believed, was dominated by the death rhythm. When the pressures of a society and set of core beliefs that repulse him, drive a man to the point of madness:

> "You are apt to find such a man acting very much like a primitive being. Such a man is apt to become stubborn and dogged, but

> superstitious, a believer in magic and a practicer of magic. Such a man is beyond religion — it is his religiousness he is suffering from."

A man acting like a primitive, asocial, being is an apt description of the auto-hero of many of Miller's works, notably *Tropic of Cancer*, or writers with whom he identified, such as the young Arthur Rimbaud. Another writer, acting primitively, who was literally, not just metaphorically, imprisoned, and a major influence on Surrealism was the Marquis de Sade. Such men move beyond revolt and get to the point where they wish to "stop reacting." He becomes asocial and wants, above all, for his actions to be: "A manifestation of life." His life becomes an affirmation — a recurrent "YES!"

Miller goes on:

> "To say 'Yes' you first have to be a Surrealist or a Dadaist, because you have understood what it means to say 'No!'"

Henry Miller began his first sustained attempt to write a book in the studio of Emil Schnellock on March 20th 1922. It was called *The Twelve Messengers* and based on Theodore Dreiser's *Twelve Men*. The symbolic number twelve already links into Miller's fascination with Christ and the twelve disciples and the twelve signs of the zodiac, which he would return to in *Tropic of Capricorn*. Henry wrote five thousand words on his first day, and composed the entire book over the next three weeks, averaging between five and eight thousand words daily:

> "I didn't know a thing about writing. I was scared shitless...I suppose it was the worst book ever written. It was a colossal tome and faulty from start to finish. But it was my first book and I was in love with it. If I had had the money, as Gide had, I would have published it at my own expense. If I had had the courage, as Whitman had, I would have peddled it door to door. Everybody I showed it to said it was terrible. I was urged to give up the idea of writing. I had to learn, as Balzac did, that one must write volumes before signing one's own name. I had to learn, as I soon did, that one has to give up everything and not do anything else but write, that one must write and write and write, even if everybody in the world advises you against it, even if nobody believes in you. Perhaps one does it just

> because nobody believes; perhaps the real secret lies in making people believe."

Henry Miller is strikingly honest in this account of his first book. It almost certainly was terrible and friends probably urged him to give up the idea of writing. He later showed no hesitation in self-publishing and self-promoting his work when he had the chance, starting with *The Mezzotints*, just two years later. Henry and June did peddle these door to door. Miller did, until he found his own voice in *Tropic of Cancer*, usually refuse to sign his own name to his writings, preferring to use those of June E. Mansfield, Valentin Nieting, Alfred Perlès, and Tony Bring. He did give up everything else to write, in 1924, at June Mansfield's urging. Although he was sporadically employed after that, he never worked a steady job again for any length of time. He kept at it, despite years of rejection and being told that he was a failure as a writer. As late as 1936, a famous editor, Bennett Cerf of Random House, wrote to Miller that he would "never attain any commercial success in America." It took time, but, when eventually, *Tropic of Cancer* was published freely in The United States, it sold over three million copies.

Looking back on his early failure, Miller was hardly surprised by his échec and proud of how well he had managed to do, given the circumstances. Henry had, as he often made clear, tried to compete with and emulate the greats in prose, the Nobel Prize winners and their ilk. His desire to state "the last word" at the beginning was "absurd and pathetic." Although his defeat was "crushing," it taught him about failure and "put iron in my backbone and sulphur in my blood."

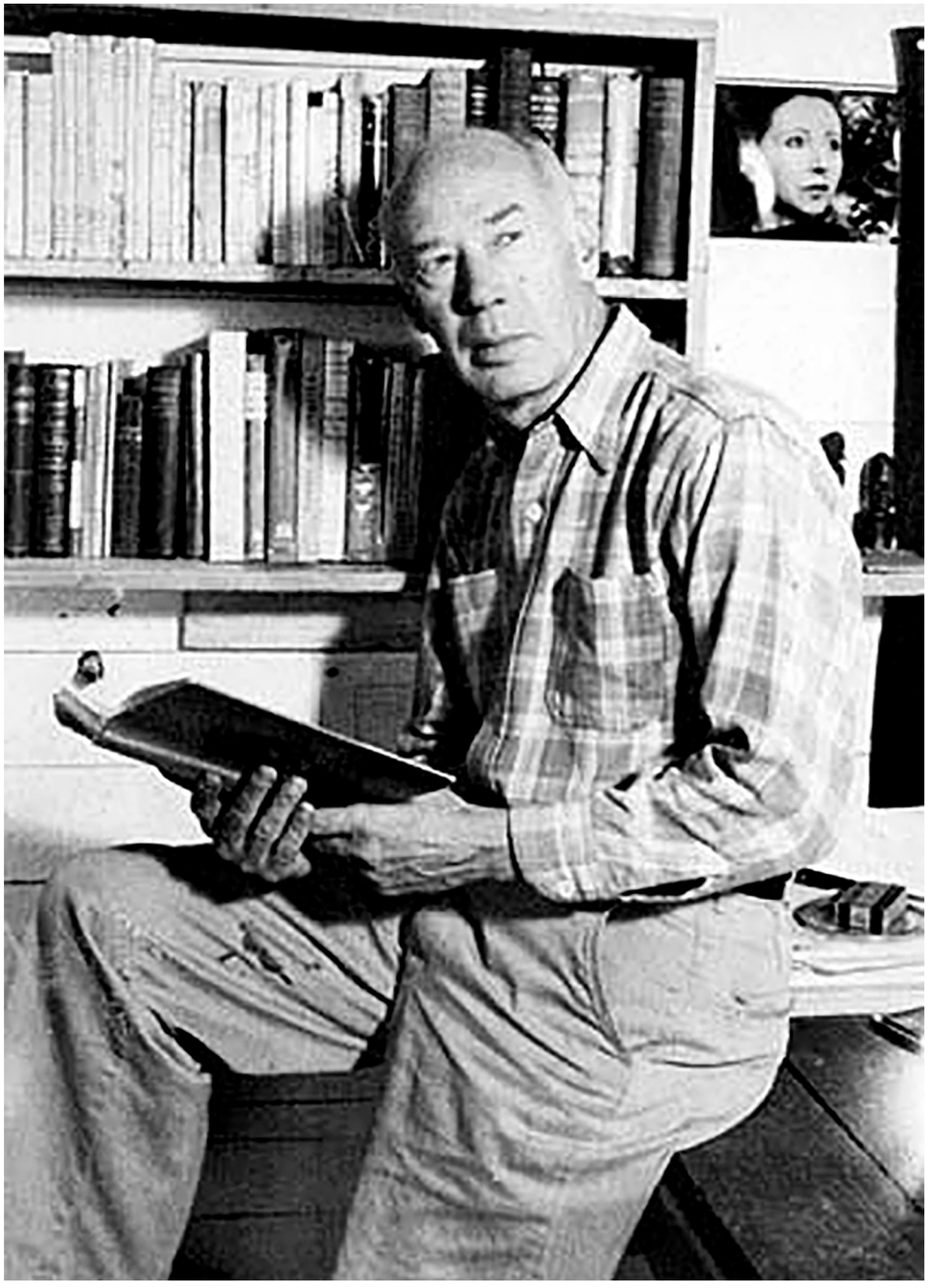
Miller revealed one major reason behind his failure with *The Twelve Messengers*. It was that he had been obsessed with "the facts." The book was one of social criticism, informed by his anarchist and socialist sympathies. It had been an attempt to foster social change by writing polemic. Doubtless, it was more journalistic or inspired by writers such as John Reed or Jack London, than an original artistic statement of Miller's emotional sympathies. It took Miller years to evolve to his mature standpoint, that:

> "To get beneath the facts I would have had to be an artist, and one doesn't become an artist overnight. First you have to be crushed, to have your conflicting points of view annihilated. You have to be wiped out as a human being in order to be born again as an individual.... You have to get beyond pity in order

> to feel from the very roots of your being. One can't make a new heaven and a new earth with 'facts.' There are no 'facts' — there is only the fact that man, every man everywhere in the world, in on his way to ordination. Some men take the long route and some take the short route. Every man is working out his destiny in his own way and nobody can be of help except by being kind, generous and patient."

When this realization came is unclear, but he certainly had the beginnings of it in place by the time he composed *Moloch*, in 1928. At the time of the *Mezzotints*, we still hear the fact-obsessed and didactic voice he complains of in his criticism of *The Twelve Messengers*. A radical change came about in his attitude and direction between 1925 and 1928. In the absence of *The Evolution of the Messenger*, his intermediate novel, we can only surmise how quickly the transformation took place. What may have helped provoke it was his interest in Surrealism, Expressionism and Post-Expressionism (such as Gottfried Benn), and including the works of George Grosz, and of a major Russian writer, whose impact flows directly into his accounts of this period in *Nexus* and *Nexus II* and the structure of *Moloch* — Nikolai Gogol.[25]

[25]Although Miller claimed to only have heard of Surrealism after his arrival in Paris, in March 1930, this is highly unlikely given the breadth of his reading of magazines, journals, newspapers and literary reviews — and of the multi-cultural nature of New York at this time, plus earlier visits to Paris by June (1927/28) and himself (1928).



Glendale

Henry Miller claimed, in *Sexus*, that it was June Smith (later June Mansfield/Miller) that first said to him (circa summer 1923) "why don't you try to write?" Thus, his striving to become a writer with the support of a muse and confidant began. This is another semi-fiction that Henry Miller wove around his life; another symbolic moment given as if it were strictly factual. Probably, June did ask Henry that burning question. Maybe this did eventually provoke the attempt to write seriously — but he had already been published in *The Black Cat* by this time, and been attempting to write for some ten years, including a full-length book, written in March–April 1922, only fifteen months before. He reveals, just shortly after this account, that his friends, some from Western Union, had long known of his desire to become a writer.

In his account, taken from *Sexus*, Henry Miller takes us symbolically back to the days he spent in Glendale with his childhood friends Joey and Tony Imhoff. The Imhoff home (from before Henry's move to Decatur Street) is intrinsically linked in Henry Miller's mind with the genesis of his desire to both write and paint. These times were "the most happy times of my childhood." It was (subconsciously) to regain the family unity, motherly love, peace, harmony, security, love, and communion of these carefree days that Henry Miller wrote. Another noticeable fact about the accounts of these days, is the total absence of his retarded sister Lauretta, whose arrival, and the problems that arose because of her handicap, threw the Miller family into disarray and constant conflict. It was with the birth of Lauretta and the realization of her unusualness that eventually drove Heinrich Miller to drink and him and his wife, Louisa, into constant arguing. It also drove the previously "Sunny Jim," contented Henry, into assuming a rebellious, bad-boy persona in order to distract his mother's wrath away from the sister he loved and sought to protect. Miller longs so much to recall Glendale fondly because this was the carefree vacation time when his family was both unified and harmonious and filled with love, togetherness and tenderness. By symbolically linking the Imhoff family home to his beginnings as a writer and painter and to the realization of his separateness or otherness, the difference between him and other boys, he is providing us the clue as to why he wrote at all — out of a surfeit of love and compassion and to heal a traumatically wounded love gone awry whose absence made his life one of loneliness and isolation and inner sadness.

Miller gives us various accounts of his time with Imhoff family and the importance the experience had to him, both psychologically and in terms of inspiration for a life of creativity. It was also the place where Henry Miller first made the link between creation of books and paintings and religiosity, which is a cornerstone of his work. In terms of writing, he gives us such examples as his early days with June, when he is still trying to woo her. Henry instinctively wrote, for June, about Glendale, and the Imhoffs.

This account is taken from my unpublished Miller writings:

> "In the autumn of 1923, June Edith Smith asked Henry Miller why he didn't simply try to write something. His first thought was to write up some of the most poignant memories of his life — the times spent between the ages of seven and twelve 'in the country,' nearby Glendale, visiting his friends Joey and Tony. Friends of the Millers, the Imhoffs would invite them over, and often Louise Miller would take Henry in tow, walk the hour to their house. Sometimes they would travel with the Imhoff's Uncle Charlie. It was Henry's first experience of nature and of art. John Imhoff was a stern man. He inspired both fear and respect. He was a watercolorist, who also made stained glass windows and carvings for local churches. He and the Miller family met through the German singing society (Saengerrund), part of the Kunst Verein, a tradition handed down in the Miller family by Valentin Nieting. Heinrich Miller was proud to know John Imhoff, and thought him a real artist. He had a deep interest in world art and a library of fine arts books, which he encouraged his children and Henry to read."

The Imhoff family was Catholic. Henry often joined them at church, yet felt uncomfortable there. He found images of the crucified Christ, and Saints morbid, even frightening, and couldn't accept transubstantiation, the confessional and constant threats of eternal damnation for mortal sin. It was these experiences that would alienate Henry irrevocably from Christianity. The years spent with Joey and Tony introduced Henry to art and a world outside the city. They also taught him to play chess, the game he loved and played regularly with those close to him (such as June) throughout his life. Once a week, the entire Miller and Imhoff families would adjourn for the evening to Laubscher's Bierkeller in Ridgewood, where the boys would be left to themselves as their

parents sang, danced the polka, waltz and schottische. The boys played cops and robbers and sipped warm beer from glasses abandoned by the dancers. Seventy years later, the thought of melancholy German drinking songs, such as "Wien, Wien, nur du allein" could still bring tears to Henry Miller's eyes. He remembered an old gypsy woman who sat in the corner singing terribly sad songs in a deep throaty voice, a half-finished glass of beer by her side, accompanying herself on the zither. Louise Miller would also take Henry to a nearby place that made a deep impression on him, and started his life-long obsession with the circus, Ulmer Park, where the European circuses would visit, and he saw his very first clowns. Here he saw the Auguste clowns with whom he identified, melancholy men who feigned humor and fun while at heart being lonely and anonymous, like Henry, trapped behind a painted smile. They would later inspire his most overtly spiritual short story, dating from 1948, *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder*.

June Mansfield read the story Henry wrote of Tony and Joey in the autumn of 1923. She was captivated. It brought tears to her eyes. Henry had instinctively hit upon a truth, which was to have important repercussions for his life's work, even though he would not grasp its full import till much later. He knew that June was no intellectual, read little, and was not well educated — therefore, he wrote simply and emotionally and laid his intellect aside. Some would later call June a *poseuse*, a kind of intellectual and artistic groupie, and criticize her adoration of the writers and artists, such as Village legend Maxwell Bodenheim and world-famous sculptor Ossip Zadkine, that she later befriended so easily. There was something of the artist's model about her and her easy relations with creative men — she was genuinely interested by their achievements and worshipped the image of the Bohemian genius. She craved to be a Muse, to be made special by association.

In her dreams, if June Smith inspired creativity and love, then the essence of her would be captured by these men and cherished. She could become immortal. She would not longer be alone or misunderstood, no longer the ordinary girl who danced with working class men and poor foreigners, dime a dance and false smiles, unwelcome hands sliding down her back, each hour ticking slowly by and no thought but the weight of her obligations, the never-ending need of dough, and feelings of emptiness. They, in turn, lapped up her compliments and accepted her adoration and praise as wonderful company. Miller wrote his story of Tony and Joey for a woman of everyday who was more interested in life than books, and not in the cerebral, heavily intellectual style

he had used previously. He tried to touch June's heart and to reveal the tender side of himself, his vulnerability, and his ability to love. He wanted to enchant her. In *Sexus*, he said that when a great writer begins to write:

> "The first word he puts down is the word of the wounded Angel — pain."[26]

His suffering brings him closer to and into identification with God.

Henry Miller, in the first writing he did for June Smith, wrote out of pain and isolation, out of a need for communion and love rather than to assert his intellect. He wrote a story late at night, with pencil and pad, to avoid waking his young daughter, Barbara. He wrote calmly and without effort, laying brick upon brick. The experience was a turning point in Miller's life. It was the first time he had written from his heart and guts and not from his mind. He laid his insecurities aside and wrote as naturally as a lotus flower opening in the sun. To him, this process was a revelation. He knew for the first time that he was capable of saying what he truly wished to. The very thought made him cry. Perhaps this story was written at the time, already recounted above, when Henry Miller first realized his own unique voice, after an evening at the vaudeville theater in Manhattan.

Once Henry Miller reached the point of his mature writing, he would often refer to himself and other creative artists and "innocents" as "Angels." I am reminded of the Old Testament quote that has, for decades, adorned George Whitman's Shakespeare & Company in Paris: "Be not inhospitable to strangers, lest they be Angels in disguise." Angels are nothing if not messengers and servants of God. The choice of this word echoes his extensive reading Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Blake, and Emmanuel Swedenborg. It asserts his belief in the divine origin of all creativity — the writer being no more than a conduit for a message inspired and dictated by a higher authority.

June Smith responded to Henry Miller's tenderness — she was deeply in need of it. Henry had met her at the waiting room of the Long Island Railroad depot, at six in the evening, a couple of days after he wrote the story. They intended to spend the evening at Manhattan Beach. She wore her polka-dotted Swiss dress they both loved so much. June read his story in the motorman's compartment where they had taken refuge, while he sat looking at the

[26] *Sexus*, 18.

setting sun. As Miller later described it, when he watched June's face as she read, and then as he elaborated upon the story, he felt almost as if he were handing her a personal message directly from God. He felt exalted. He knew, from her expression, how deeply it had touched her — that she now had faith in him.

Henry Miller had found the way to commune with a person he loved. It was a mystery that he had spent years trying to unravel. Henry had a Proustian memory. He filed this "moment of being" away in his mind, like a treasure. The memory of it, and the feeling of love and admiration he sensed emanating from June, was to sustain him for nearly a decade — through the most difficult times of his life, which he would never have conceived at that moment, still lay before him. They both let down their guard that evening. June was now convinced that she had before her a man who could be a writer and join her in a life of creativity and excitement. June was still vulnerable, had understandable reservations and fears. Would a married man balk at leaving behind a small child? Would Beatrice Wickens fight to keep him? Only time would tell. Neither Henry nor June had much to lose, unless it was each other, and the illusion they shared, of a creative life — a great writer and his indispensable Muse.

Henry Miller also provides a direct link between Glendale and his adoption of watercolor painting as his secondary form of creative expression. Miller came, by observing his father's friend, to associate painting with religious feelings and spirituality:

> "Usually the father (John Imhoff) retired fairly early. He did not go to sleep immediately. He made watercolors by the light of a student lamp. We had to pass through his room (on tiptoe) to go to our bedroom. It always gave me a Holy feeling to see Mr. Imhoff bent over a pad of paper with a brush or two in his hand. He seemed not to be aware of our presence."[27]

Even in 1960, the now famous Henry Miller still owned the first watercolor John Imhoff had given his parents, when Henry was seven or eight:

> "I still marvel, each time I look at it, that the human hand could have accomplished such wonders. It must have been done under a magnifying glass with a fine brush."[28]

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[27]Henry Miller *Book of Friends* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1976): 41.

[28]Henry Miller *To Paint is to Love Again* (Alhambra, CA: Cambria Press, 1960): 7.

Henry Miller described his own favorite times painting:

> "How wonderful; that feeling, as happens sometimes, when coming home about midnight, the place extremely quiet, the light giving just the right glow about my worktable, my senses keenly alive, yet not so sharp as to push me on to writing (a sort of sifting of the ashes kind of feeling, the fire warm but dying), I sit down by the little pad, determined to do just one watercolor in peace and harmony. To paint in this way is always like communing with oneself — and with the world too. I seem to carry on a personal conversation. The colors talk to me. I cajole them. I implore them. And, in the right mood, I will take infinite pains, for some unknown reason, to mix a little splotch of color, which will fill about an eighth of an inch on the paper."

Miller's account of his late night painting routine, at Villa Seurat, echoes closely that of John Imhoff painting at night in Glendale, when Henry was a child. It also emphasizes the spiritual import Miller associated with painting. It reveals the peace he found in creating watercolors. The flow of the paints, and the blending of colors, one into the other, gives him the distinct feeling that the washes and paints are alive, and in communion with his deeper being. Henry communes with his own self, but also with all creation — and by implication with the divine spirit. Painting thus becomes, for Henry Miller, as for John Imhoff, a religious act — at once a crying out for communion and love and also a prayer, an act of completion.

Immediately following Henry Miller's account, in *Sexus*, of his reveries provoked by June Smith's question "why don't you try to write," he reveals, as he did periodically in both life and his writing, that he felt himself to be set apart, destined for great things. Even as a young boy, he sensed that he was different from others. He seemed to possess an "extra sense, which enables one to participate and at the same time to observe one's participation." He had assumed this was normal, and only later came to realize it was not. He felt that his senses were heightened when compared to other boys'. Throughout his life, Henry Miller would be obsessed by the duality and polarity he saw within himself and all creation. Sometimes, like Anaïs Nin, he spoke of his schizophrenia, his divided self.

Musing on the act of writing, Miller came to believe that it must be "devoid of will." "The word, like the deep ocean current, has to float to the surface, of

its own impulse." The parallel to Surrealism and to divinely inspired texts is again obvious. Creation and writing are repeatedly linked to flow and to water. Children, Miller asserts, have no need to write because they are innocent. Similarly, the truly harmonious, enlightened and good beings, like Christ or the Buddha, have no need to write.

> "A man writes to throw off the poison which he has accumulated because of his false way of life. He is trying to recapture his innocence…"

If it is his innocence he is trying to recapture, then it is his world of childhood, before he was traumatized and perverted by society and the weakness and betrayal of those he loved and trusted to protect him and his sister. Henry is trying to recapture the world he knew in Glendale.

"No man would set a word down on paper if he had the courage to live out what he believed in," Miller asserted. Here, he gives us a vital clue to the disparity between the Henry Miller of the novels and essays and as others knew him, in daily life. In his writing, he committed acts, espoused ideas and suggested solutions that he could not find the courage to commit to or act upon in daily life. He chooses, at times, to "defer action" in the hope of "power, fame, success." Henry Miller liked to quote Honoré de Balzac: "Books are human actions in death." Candidly, Henry Miller admits that the writer does not want his ideal world to emerge here and now. If it did, he would lose his power and purpose for writing. Instead, he wants:

> "An impossible world in which he is the uncrowned puppet ruler dominated by forces utterly beyond his control. He is content to rule insidiously — in the fictive world of symbols — because the very though of contact with rude and brutal realities frightens him...he makes no effort to impose that higher reality on the world by force of example. He is satisfied just to preach...a death-croaking prophet always without honor...shunned by those...who are ready and willing to assume responsibility for the affair of the world. The truly great writer does not want to write: he wants the world to be a place in which he can live the life of the imagination.... The process of putting words down is equivalent to giving oneself a narcotic."

In this passage, Henry Miller gives us many clues about his own personality and writing. He writes because there is a disparity between who he is and ideally would like to be. He lacks the courage to live out his vision of a better world. His own personal vanity and desire for acclaim and recognition are ultimately connected to his unwillingness to lead by example in his real life, even if he does in his imagination. Writing is a drug. It allows him to cope with the duality within himself and with the oppressive nature of society. The words Miller uses about the writer, as one who preaches and is a prophet reveal the crisis of religiosity at the heart of the compulsion to write. Writing offers the writer a world in which he is in control and can decide what is real and unreal, true and not true, and what is recorded for posterity. This need to control the accounts of one's own life and activities and the remembered nature of all those around one is a revelation of a personality unable to cope with the world as is, or the past as it was. It is a sign, as in *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, of a profound wound and trauma of lost love, of an insecurity and instability traceable back to childhood. In the case of Anaïs, it was caused by the departure of her beloved father. In the case of Henry Miller, by the rupture between his beloved mother and himself, provoked by the birth of his sister, Lauretta.

As often in the writings of Henry Miller, the duality of his personality surfaces in juxtaposed passages of his writing. He is composing in the white-hot moment. Henry has no thought for consistency. Having stated, in *Sexus*, that the writer wants to be a sole ruler, in a world of his imagination (an echo of de Sade), he then claims, immediately after, that the writer wants: "to enchant, but not to enslave."

> "I wanted a greater, richer life, but not at the expense of others; I wanted to free the imagination of all men at once because without the support of the whole world, without a world imaginatively unified, the freedom of the imagination becomes a vice. I had no respect for writing per se any more than I had for God per se. Nobody, no principle, no idea has validity in itself. What is valid is only that much — of anything, God included — which is realized by all men in common."

In this passage Henry Miller asserts the despotic and didactic nature of his art. His writing is principally social, and certainly not principally sexual, as Norman Mailer once claimed. It is part of an attempt to bring about the unification of all mankind and of mankind with the divine, through a universal religiosity.

Henry goes on:

> "People are always worried about the fate of the genius. I never worried about the genius: genius takes care of the genius in a man. My concern was always for the nobody, the man who is lost in the shuffle, the man who is so common, so ordinary, that his presence is not even noticed."

This reiterates that the man who helped so many others at Western Union has not, despite appearances to the contrary, abandoned his fellow man, but rather sees himself, in his writing, as working towards engendering a compassion for and solidarity with the unknown, the underprivileged, the persecuted, and the outcast of society.

"One genius does not inspire another." Miller wrote: "All geniuses are leeches, so to speak. They feed from the same source — the blood of life. The most important thing for the genius is to make himself useless, to be absorbed in the common stream, to become a fish again and not a freak of nature. The only benefit, I reflected, which the act of writing could offer me was to remove the differences that separated me from my fellow man. I definitely did not want to become the artist, in the sense of becoming something strange, something apart and out of the current of life."

This passage explains the very nature of Henry Miller's auto-novels — his adoption of the tone of everyday speech, the concerns, vocabulary and actions of everyday life in his books. He attempts to restore everyday life to literature and to create a unity between the world of the streets, the world of his youth, and the literary and artistic worlds of his maturity. In so doing he can unify the warring elements within his own personality.

Henry goes on:

> "The best thing about writing is not the actual labor of putting word against word, brick upon brick, but the preliminaries, the spadework, which is done in silence, under any circumstances, in dream as well as in the waking state. In short — the period of gestation. No man ever puts down what he intended to say: the original creation, which is taking place all the time, whether one writes or doesn't write, belongs to the primal flux: it has no dimensions, no form, no time element. In this preliminary state, which is creation and not birth, what disappears suffers

> no destruction; something, which was already there, something imperishable, like memory, or matter, or God, is summoned and in it one flings himself like a twig into a torrent. Words, sentences, ideas, no matter how subtle or ingenious, the maddest flights of poetry, the most profound dreams, the most hallucinating visions, are but crude hieroglyphs chiseled in pain and sorrow to commemorate an event which is untransmissible."

This passage again links Henry Miller's notion of writing and creativity to flow and to the river of life, which flows through eternity towards the ocean of bliss. The author is swept away into the torrential flow of creation. The writer is, yet again, said to use symbols, or hieroglyphs to communicate. Nothing is really created or destroyed. Everything already exists. Everything is miraculous and marvelous. Discord is superficial. All is one. The ideas are rooted in Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

In an intelligently ordered world there would be no need to make the unreasonable attempt of putting such miraculous happenings down. Indeed, it would make no sense, for if men only stopped to realize it, who would be content with the counterfeit when the real is at every one's beck and call? Who would want to switch in and listen to Beethoven, for example, when he might himself experience the ecstatic harmonies that Beethoven so desperately strove to register?

> "A great work of art, if it accomplishes anything, serves to remind us, or let us say to set us dreaming, of all that is fluid and intangible. Which is to say, the universe.
>
> It cannot be understood; it can only be accepted or rejected. If accepted we are revitalized; if rejected we are diminished. Whatever it purports to be it is not: it is always something more for which the last word will never be said. It is all that we put into it out of hunger for that which we deny every day of our lives.
>
> If we accepted ourselves as completely, the work of art, in fact the whole world of art, would die of malnutrition. Every man Jack of us moves without feet at least a few hours a day, when his eyes are closed and his body prone. The art of dreaming when wide-awake will be in the power of every man one day.

> Long before that, books will cease to exist, for when men are wide awake and dreaming their powers of communication (with one another and with the spirit that moves all men) will be so enhanced as to make writing seem like the harsh and raucous squawks of an idiot.
>
> I think and know all this, lying in the dark memory of a Summer's day, without having mastered, or even halfheartedly attempted to master, the art of the crude hieroglyph. Before ever I begin I am disgusted with the efforts of the acknowledged masters. Without the ability of the knowledge to make so much as a portal in the facade of the grand edifice, I criticize and lament the architecture itself. If I were only a tiny brick in the vast cathedral of this antiquated facade I would be infinitely happier; I would have life, the life of the whole structure, even as an infinitesimal part of it. But I am outside — a barbarian who cannot make even a crude sketch, let alone a plan, of the edifice he dreams of inhabiting.
>
> I dream a new blazingly magnificent world, which collapses as soon as the light is turned on. A world that vanishes but does not die, for I have only to become still again and stare wide eyed into the darkness and it reappears... There is then a world in me, which is utterly unlike any world I know of. I do not think it is my exclusive property — it is only the angle of my vision, which is exclusive, in that it is unique.
>
> If I talk the language of my unique vision nobody understands; the most colossal edifice may be reared and yet remain invisible. The thought of that haunts me. What good will it do to make an invisible temple?
>
> Drifting with the flux — because of that little phrase. This is the sort of thinking that went on whenever the word 'writing' came up."

Henry Miller clearly links his writing to religious architecture, to a cathedral, as Proust did. Yet, Miller's religious edifice is Eastern, Indian and Buddhist, rather than Christian. He says that he would have been happier as a brick in the façade — in other words, an anonymous part of the edifice, rather than its architect. That way, he would be unified with the structure and with every living part

of it. This takes us back to Henry Miller's fascination with Michael Fraenkel and Walter Lowenfels' manifesto, *Anonymous* and with anonymous art. As would-be (but temporarily, in the 1920s, failing) architect of a life's work in writing, Henry Miller links himself directly to "the architect of the universe" — God. He is apart from that which he would be unified with. As long as he continues to write and not simply be, he cannot be at one with the rest of creation.

In the connection between his writing and religious architecture, Henry Miller is taking up a theme, well-known to his generation, which forms a centerpiece of the writings of Marcel Proust and of one of Proust's seminal influences, a man to whose work he dedicated six years of his life as translator and interpreter — John Ruskin.

In his Introduction to *On Reading Ruskin*, Richard Macksey writes:

> "Most important of all in terms of Ruskin's final legacy to Proust are the emblems of the Gothic cathedral and the book of memory that inform the narrator's perilous vocation and the novels' ultimate closure."

After Ruskin's death, Proust made pilgrimages to the cathedrals Ruskin had written about or hoped to write about, but never did. When assaulted by the censors and moralists and helping Elmer Gertz prepare a defense of *Tropic of Cancer* from prosecution, Henry Miller wrote the following:

> "Have you ever thought to make reference, when defending the 'obscene,' to the famous Hindu manuals of love, like the Karma Sutra and the Ananga Ranga or to present photos to the court showing the erotic, but religious, sculpture from the caves and temples of India?"[29]

Since Henry Miller was not a Christian and was heavily indebted to Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, he (naïvely) found nothing unusual in suggesting his books be defended by reference to Eastern art and literature. He would have found similar parallels with his work in Gothic cathedrals and the architecture of early Catholic religious art — such as sculptural adornments of certain of the cathedral groin-vaults. Knowing the extreme bile Catholicism raised

[29]25 January 1962 (Gertz, 23).

among many American Protestants, he chose to distance himself from this tradition in his defense.

Henry Miller did reveal his urge to write to his friends and colleagues during the Western Union years:

> "In ten years of sporadic efforts I had managed to write a million words or so. You might as well say — a million blades of grass. To call attention to this ragged lawn was humiliating. All my friends knew that I had the itch to write — that's what made me good company now and then — the itch.
>
> Ed Gavarni, for example, who was studying to become a priest — he would have a little gathering at his home expressly for my benefit, so that I could scratch myself in public and thus make the evening somewhat of an event.
>
> To prove his interest in the noble art, he would drop around to see me at more or less regular intervals, bringing cold sandwiches, apples and beer. Sometimes he would have a pocketful of cigars. I was to fill my belly and spout. If he had had an ounce of talent he would never have dreamed of becoming a priest...
>
> There was Zabrowskie, the crack telegraph operator of the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America. He always examined my shoes, my hat, my overcoat, to see if they were in good condition. He had no time for reading, nor did he care what I wrote, nor did he believe I would ever get anywhere, but he liked to hear about it. He was interested in horses, mud-larks particularly. Listening to me was a harmless diversion and worth the price of a good lunch or a new hat, if needs be. It excited me to tell him stories because it was like talking to the man in the moon. He could interrupt the most subtle divagations, by asking whether I preferred strawberry pie or cold pot cheese for dessert . . .
>
> There was Costigan, the knuckleduster from Yorkville — another good standby and sensitive as an old sow. He once knew a writer for the Police Gazette; that made him eligible to seek the company of the elect. He had stories to tell me, stories that would sell, if I would come down off my perch and lend

> an ear. Costigan appealed to me in a strange way. He looked positively inert, a pimple faced old sow with wiry bristles all over; he was so gentle, so tender, that if he had disguised himself as a woman you would never know that he was capable of shoving a guy against a wall and pummeling his brains out. He was the sort of tough egg who can sing falsetto and get up a fat collection to buy a funeral wreath. In the telegraph business he was considered to be a quiet, dependable clerk who had the company's interest at heart.
>
> In his off hours he was a holy terror, the scourge of the neighborhood. He had a wife whose maiden name was Tillie Jupiter; she was built like a cactus plant and gave plenty of rich milk. An evening with the two of them would set my mind to work like a poisoned arrow. Of friends and supporters I must have had around fifty. Of the lot there were three of four who had some slight understanding of what I was trying to do."

Among these friends, he included Emil Schnellock, Harolde Orvis Ross, Emil Cohen, and Haridas T. Muzumdar.

There were many who told Henry Miller, during the Western Union years that he would never be a writer. These included a journalist friend of Emil Schnellock (alluded to in *Sexus*) and Bruce Barton, an author-friend of Miller, who became known around this time for his book on Jesus. In the meantime, Henry Miller bided his time. Revealingly, he describes himself at this point as: "lying in the dark, a little twig floating in the Japanese current." This situates him in the Japanese/Buddhist tradition, even though he was, as yet, "in the dark" about how to find his unique voice. The river of life — the flow of the inevitable, was carrying Henry along.[30] Later, he would say that in order to create and fulfill ourselves we only have to open our eyes to what is already there, instead of "slaughtering our finest impulses" every day.

Henry Miller saw his decision to become a writer and opt out of the daily grind as stepping off the treadmill — refusing to participate actively in a society that was "one great aggregation of individuals who did nothing but repeat the mistakes of their forefathers."

[30]This image echoes Miller's image of Walt Whitman as a cork floating in the river of life.

He had learned that:

> "The men who were most in life, who were molding life, who were life itself, ate little, slept little, owned little or nothing... they were interested in the truth and truth alone. They recognized only one kind of activity — creation."

Miller claimed that he understood this "at the brink of manhood," but that he had gotten caught up in the usual routine of job, duty, wife, and family. The demands of these chafed against his tremendous hunger for life. He felt bound to others, who were dragging him down and stifling his true self by the demands they made upon him. There was his mother, who needed him to save his father (and the tailor shop) from the effects of his drinking.[31] There was his sister, who needed his protection. There was his aunt Amelia, spoken of in *Black Spring*. There was his desperate mistress Pauline Chouteau who needed Henry to help save her dying son, George. There were his friends — and then the hundreds of messengers at Western Union, who desperately needed his help. The demands upon his kindness and charity, not to mention his time and emotional energy, were enormous.

> "My liberation seemed to involve pain to those near and dear to me. Every move I made for my own private good brought about reproach and condemnation. I was a traitor a thousand times over. I had lost the right even to become ill — because they needed me. I wasn't allowed to remain 'inactive.' Had I died, I think they would have tried to galvanize my corpse into a semblance of life."

Several writers touched Henry Miller and gave him an inkling of his state at that time. The following lines, from *Novalis*, profoundly moved him:

> "The seat of the soul is where the inner world and outer world touch each other. For nobody knows himself, if he is only himself and not also another at the same time."

This highlights the duality Henry Miller always felt within.

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[31] "There was a time when I acted as my father's keeper" (*Sexus*). Miller links himself again symbolically to Christ.

Other writers seemed, at times, to provide Miller's only sense of communion. They could dominate his thoughts and emotions:

> "There is as time when ideas tyrannize over one, when one is just a hapless victim of another's thoughts. This 'possession' by another seems to occur in periods of depersonalization, when the warring selves come unglued, as it were."

Hence, at times when Miller felt his personality was in danger of dissolving, when it was in great flux, then other writers could take possession of him. Gradually, an inner transformation takes place. Ultimately, this blending with the hearts and minds of others is healing. It allows one to see oneself and not the societal mask one has worn for so long. One gains perspective on oneself as reflected in the hearts and minds of like-minded spirits. Henry likens an individual, undergoing such a journey, to a ship, foundering time and time again. But, through the disintegration of the human vessel and the ego, treasures are revealed. The ship becomes at one with the flow of the ocean and the animal/vegetable life that it encounters. Thereby, "what was once a ship becomes the nameless indestructible." The "nameless" and "indestructible" are clearly divine.

This transformation leads to a life of creative expression. Creation is "eternal play." It takes place on the borderline of the inner and outer world, of the known and unknown selves.

Henry Miller clearly admitted, in *Sexus*, that he was initially terrified of making the leap into a life of writing and creativity. He felt compulsion to do so, but lived in fear of the consequences and of failure. This fear and uncertainty about his ability dogged him. It probably stymied his ability to become an established writer for over a decade. It was his irresistible need to "fix" June's volatile personality and to try to win her definitively that finally broke the deadlock. Henry came to feel the need to:

> "Create the legend in which I could fit the key that would open her soul."

She was:

> "A desperate woman, seeking through love to unite herself with herself."

Although he does not admit it, Henry Miller was the same kind of person. This is one reason why they ultimately could not remain together and caused each other so much pain.

Note that Miller is creating a "legend." He is not recounting "facts." His books are not a factual account of his life. They are not autobiography. The personalities, who formed the models for his characters, such as June and himself, were not as he described them in daily life.

Henry Miller's writing desk at 18 Villa Seurat.

Straight Line to Spiral

At the start of his career, Henry Miller tried to approach the problem of writing, just like any other problem at the time, directly through his mind. He used his intellect and the study of other writers to try to unravel the mystery of writing. He tried to move in a straight line, from problem to solution, by force of study and will. Miller also attempted, in novels such as *Moloch* and *Crazy Cock*, to write books that were controversial and whose sales or publicity potential would come from not only the quality of the writing but also the subject matter (possibly to be banned). He used, as his models, bestsellers (such as Theodore Dreiser for *Twelve Messengers*), controversial or banned books (such as contemporary novels on lesbianism for *Crazy Cock*) or literary greats, such as Nobel laureates Knut Hamsun and Romain Rolland. It was only when he learned to move like the crab (Cancer) and in his natural style of (Hindu) Spiral Form that he found the multiplicity of vision and perspective that would allow him full expression. It also enabled Henry Miller to truly understand his life and the medium of literary composition. What had once been impossible (writing) came to seem effortless, simply because he accepted to write the words that came from the recesses of his own heart rather than words he felt obliged to compare to those of another writer. He also achieved another major realization that had profound implications for both his writing and his life. In the 1920s and to a degree in the early 1930s, Henry Miller suggested in his writing a way of reordering society. His work is filled with social criticism, which implied major change in the very infrastructure of the society in which he lived. As he matured, Henry Miller changed his focus to the more human and individual level. He came to the realization that society could only be changed one individual at a time. The most important aspect of his awakening to the reality of societal development was his acceptance of the fact that:

> "The world was not to be put in order: the world is order incarnate. It is for us to put ourselves in unison with this order, to know what is the world order in contradistinction to the wishful-thinking orders, which we seek to impose upon one another. The power which we long to possess, in order to establish the good, the true and the beautiful, would prove

> to be, if we could have it, but the means of destroying one another."

If proof were needed, Henry Miller only had to trace the development of Bolshevism/Communism, from the social idealism of the 1910s, through organized famines and forced displacement of peoples, to Stalin and the Gulags, onwards to the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

> "The great joy of the artist," Henry Miller declared in *Sexus*, is, "to become aware of an higher order of things, to recognize by the compulsive and spontaneous manipulation of his own impulses the resemblance between human creation and what is called 'divine' creation."

By the time Henry Miller had the courage to infuse his work with surrealism, nonsense, fantasy, invention, sexuality, automatic writing and waking and sleeping dreams, he had:

> "...progressed, if that is the word, from scholar to critic to pole-axer. My literary experiments lay in ruins, like the cities of old which were sacked by the vandals."[32]

This progression Henry Miller traces is clearly visible in his writing. In the earliest days, he is a scholar of literature, trying to study, dissect, and emulate other writers. Then he becomes increasingly a critic, of both other writers and of society. He aims to use his work to promote his anarchist beliefs and bring about social justice and change (*Moloch*) — as well as attacking other writers in order to assert his own worth (for example, *The World of Lawrence*, in which he criticizes three of his influences: D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust, or *Tropic of Cancer*, in which he attacks several established world-ranking or important Parisian figures, ranging from Mahatma Gandhi, James Joyce, and Haridas T. Muzumdar, to Joseph Schrank, Samuel Putnam, and Wambly Bald). When Henry Miller finds his true voice and full confidence — from

[32]In the continuation of this text, Miller wrote: "I wanted to build, but the materials were unreliable and the plans had not even become blueprints. If the substance of art is the human soul, then I must confess that with dead souls I could visualize nothing germinating under my hand." Henry alludes to both Marcel Proust and Nikolai Gogol and his early novel, *Moloch*. Again, he refers to himself as a builder/architect.

Tropic of Capricorn onwards, he is content simply to write as himself. *Tropic of Cancer* may be his satirical *chef d'œuvre*, but his array of literary masterpieces includes, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *The Colossus of Maroussi* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*. The book, in which Henry Miller reveals his most personal self, is *Black Spring*. His major philosophical statement, outside of his novels, is the original, Ben Abramson published, version of *The World of Sex*.

The path of development Miller describes, while superficially true, does not provide a factually accurate account of his career. At various points he returned to earlier forms of writing due to personal stresses in his life. Thus, in *A Devil in Paradise*, he launched a scathing personal attack on his old friend Conrad Moricand. In a late text, contained in *Four Visions of America*, he returned to the social criticism of the American scene begun in the abandoned book *Our America*, (mid-1920s) and continued in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. Thus, even in his explanations of the evolution his work, Henry Miller attempted to furnish a symbolic truth, in order to attain a closer form of Reality, rather than a factually accurate account.

One of the most poignant texts that Henry Miller wrote, explaining his mature view of how he saw writing is the following:

> "To be caught in a glut of dramatic episodes, to be ceaselessly participating, means among other things that one is unaware of the outlines of the bigger drama of which human activity is but a small part. The act of writing puts a stop to one kind of activity in order to release another. When a monk, prayerfully meditating, walks slowly and silently down the hall of a temple, and thus walking sets in motion one prayer-wheel after another, he gives a living illustration of the act of sitting down to write. The mind of the writer, no longer preoccupied with observing and knowing, wanders meditatively amidst a world of forms are set spinning by the mere brush of his wings. No tyrant this, wreaking his will upon the subjugated minions of his ill-gotten kingdom. An explorer, rather, calling to life the slumbering entities of his dream…
>
> To ask the purpose of this game — how is it related to life, is idle. As well ask the Creator why volcanoes? Why hurricanes? Since they obviously contribute nothing but disaster. But, since they are disastrous only for those engulfed in them, whereas they can be illuminating for those that survive and study them,

> so it is in the creative world. The dreamer, who returns from a voyage, if he is not shipwrecked on route, may and usually does convert the collapse of his tenuous fabric into other stuff."

The writer combines the sense of wonder at the world of a child, with the analytical powers and acute insight of a scientist and psychologist. This combination is enhanced by a finely honed ability to read both people and situations and to see well beneath the surface to the emotional and symbolic truth, rather than the factual semblance of things. The writer's reactions to events and people combine to create "realization." "The artist's game is to move over into Reality," Miller wrote. This Reality exists beneath and beyond the surface of things. It is neither anthropocentric nor concerned with surface facts. It exists in a realm in which the artist/writer can become "the I of his I."

When Henry Miller succeeded in writing from the dictation of his inner voice, "…it would flow like a song — quietly, evenly, with the steady luster of magnesium. As if hymning the Bhagavad Gita. A monk in a saffron robe extolling the work of the Omniscient One. No longer a writer. A saint. A saint from Sanhedrin sent…." Writing with great symbolism, Miller said: "…when I sit at my typewriter, I always face East." Ending a letter to Michael Fraenkel in *Hamlet*, Henry signed his name "Henry Lin Yutang Miller of the Villa Seurat Library." Like the men of China, Japan and India, he saw no conflict between the sexual and religious. He had followed a path of death and rebirth in Paris:

> "In that first year or so in Paris I literally died, was literally annihilated — and resurrected as a new man. *Tropic of Cancer* is a sort of human document, written in blood, recording my struggle in the womb of death. The strong sexual odor is, if anything, the aroma of birth, disagreeable, repulsive even, when dissociated from its purpose. *Tropic of Capricorn* represents another death and birth, the transition, if I may say so, from the conscious artist to the budding spiritual being which is the last phase of evolution."

All that Miller wrote up until *Capricorn* was merely a prelude to the real story he wished to tell. The sexual elements were religious in intent: "…a writhing, pulsating, façade such as we see on Indian temples. Sometimes it is a fresco hidden in a sacred cave where one may sit and contemplate things of the spirit."

Henry Miller addressed the sexuality and obscenity in his books in various books and articles, including: *The World of Sex*, *Art & Outrage*, "Obscenity & the Law of Reflection," "Obscenity in Literature," and "Letters to Trygve Hirsch." He made it clear that he believed:

> "…The test of a man's humanity lies in his acceptance of life, all aspects of life, not just those that correspond with his own limited viewpoint."

Those who would ban books and burn them Miller usually regarded as "… prudes, bigots and other psychopaths…". He knew that while Hitler's men were burning books in Berlin and Munich the would-be censors were doing the same in New York and Boston. The "cancer" he wrote about in the first Tropic book was "the sado-masochistic complex that has fastened itself into the heart of our civilized life…fear, guilt and murder — these constitute the real triumvirate which rules our lives." The real obscenity was in modern everyday life and warfare. The purpose of the sexual elements in his work was to "… awaken, to usher in a sense of reality." He drew the parallel with the Zen masters who "…never hesitate to resort to any means in order to awaken their disciples; they will even perform what we would call sacrilegious acts." The function of obscenity in literature is intimately tied to:

> "…the lust to convert…everything dramatic is in the nature of an appeal, a frantic appeal for communion. Violence, whether in deed or speech, is an inverted sort of prayer…Whatever demands radical treatment demands God, and always through some form of death or annihilation…What is obscene are the preliminary or anticipatory movements of birth, the pre-conscious writhing in the face of a life to be."

Miller knew that modern Christian societies had "…transgressed and violated every tenet of its belief in a new way of life, the way ordained by the Saviour." Obscenity in literature, whether in Chaucer, Rabelais, de Sade or Miller was part of a quest for truth:

> "Deceit and hypocrisy, such as are prevalent in our time, have a way of provoking honest men to explosive language, to shocking language."

Henry Miller found himself living in a violent, murderous, world "grounded in falsity" and "dehumanized" — in which you tend to "encounter nothing but sham, fraud, deceit, falsehood."

It should be clear that we must understand and read all Henry Miller's writings within the frame of reference of their religious purpose. To focus, as Katy Masuga does, on intertextuality, allusions to writers, and their appearance as characters in Miller's novels, and the "meta-questions as to the nature of literature itself," is to miss the whole import of Miller's writing and the vital significance that other writers had for him. Of the six writers she chose to focus on, Whitman, Lawrence and Dostoevsky all had a purpose in their writing that cannot be divorced from its religious, social, and spiritual implications. She is as guilty as the writers and critics she lambastes, figures far greater than she, such as Erica Jong and Norman Mailer, of a limited reading of Miller. As she says:

> "Critics tend to find what they are looking for, in the sense that they assume a text necessarily always lends itself to the tools and questions of the close reading, giving up its 'true' reading through all the usual avenues."

Her books smell of careerism and lack of respect for those who paved the way for her work.

The Books in My Life does not provide a definitive or balanced view of which books influenced Henry Miller most. He wrote parts of a sequel. He never published them. For example, he does not dwell on Ibsen, but elsewhere admitted "Ibsen exerted a great influence on me in the formative years of my life." He does not talk in any detail about Chang-Tzu, who was more important to him than even Lao-Tse — or Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Oswald Spengler, or Nietzsche whom he reread almost more than any other writer, and who was a major influence. As with all aspects of his life, while giving the semblance of telling the whole truth about his adventures and experiences, Henry Miller selectively edited and distorted the history of his intellectual life and reading towards a higher purpose. The intellectual life he lived according to the account given in his books was part of the legend in which he buried himself — and not a whole or rounded picture of Henry Miller the man and writer.

Suggested Further Reading

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[33]I would like to draw attention to Katy Masuga's failure to acknowledge or thank me for the various kindnesses I showed her while she was working on her books, such as sending her rare publications, overseeing publication of her work in *Nexus*, and even introducing her to Jim Haynes, who provided a home for her while she was writing one of them. As she once wrote to me: "Better to be thoughtful and look stupid than presumptuous and inconsiderate! Right?"

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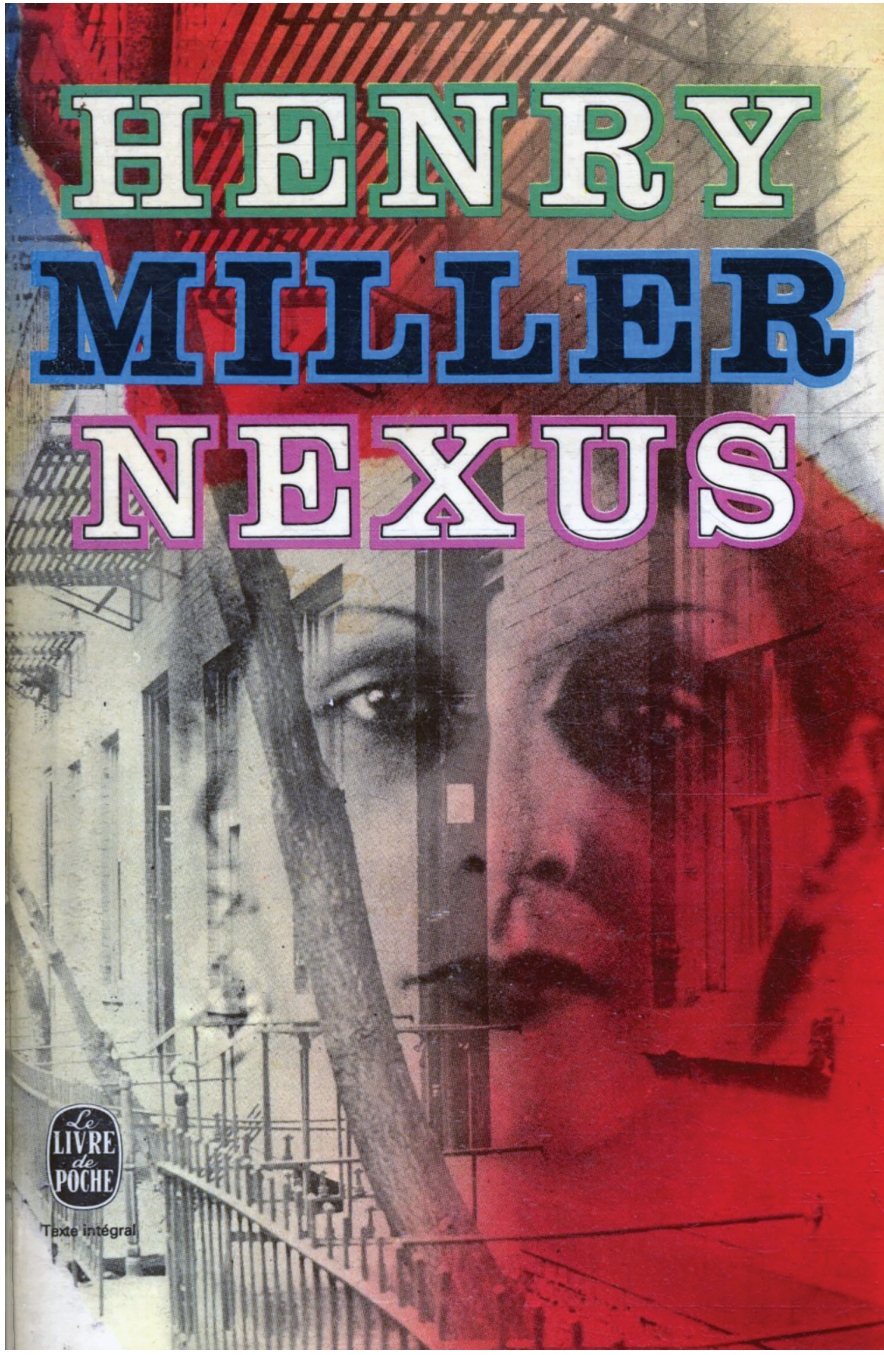

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